

VICTOR NOVELS

女神異聞録ヘルソナ

神取の野望

南原順



KAZ

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MEGAMI IBUNROKU PERSONA
KANDORI'S AMBITION

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PROLOGUE

THE NIGHT BEFORE

A police car was driving through Mikage-cho at night.

"It's too quiet"

The middle-aged man sitting in the passenger seat muttered to himself.

From the other side of the windshield, it could be seen that few people were on Joy Street. Normally, because of the arcade, the shopping center near the station would be bustling with people until late at night.

"Do you feel something different in the air, Officer Matsumoto?"

"The air, you say....Inspector Hattori?"

The young officer called Matsumoto stared intently into the face of the man in the gray suit.

"Yes" He nodded with a serious expression, "It feels like something's off."

"Is that so?"

Matsumoto, gripping the steering wheel, tilted his head.

"Could it just be the influence of that incident?"

That incident....

Needless to say, this refers to the bizarre incident that has been disturbing the town.

This is the Seta Ward of Mikage-cho.

For those who with an interest in archaeology, this town is known for the Mikage Ruins located in the northwestern part of the town. However, for everyone else, this town is nothing more than a suburban commuter community that has developed around Mikage-cho's Subway Station.

Yes, an ordinary town that you could find anywhere—that was Mikage-cho.

...But for the past month, the city has been in turmoil.

It all started with the discovery of five bodies at Alaya Shrine late at night.

The bodies, torn to shreds, with organs and bodily fluids all over the place, belonged to a group of delinquents who hung out in the neighborhood during late nighttime.

As the investigation proceeded amidst rumors of grotesque murders, forensics announced that based on footprints and body hair found in the vicinity, they were likely torn apart by sharp claws and fangs resembling those of tigers or bears.

However, there are no facilities in Mikage-cho, such as zoos, that house such animals.

The most likely explanation was that it could've been the work of a privately owned carnivorous animal, but that, too, was not particularly applicable. The investigation was a difficult one.

"After all those incidents, a normal person wouldn't go out at night"

The officer looked back at him with a look that indicated how obvious that was.

"This morning, under the highway, they found another dead body that might've been an office lady, right?"

"Yeah" He replied with a self-conscious tone.

The body, as if it had been eaten from the head, was completely missing from the neck up.

"Could there be tigers or wolves lurking around, Inspector?"

"Who knows" Hattori slurred his words.

The incident wasn't the only thing.

The young policeman was unaware that as soon as the gang of delinquents' murders hit the headlines and the Mikage Police Department began investigating the case with all its might, a string of bizarre murders occurred one after the other.

They were so bizarre, so strange, that it was kept a secret only to some of the investigators.

Early in the morning, at Mikage Hospital, a burnt corpse had been found.

It was completely charred, as if it had been burned in the fires of hell.

A frozen body found was also found inside the subway structure...in a state similar to being sealed in Arctic ice.

In addition, there were over fifteen cases of bizarre deaths found all over town, such as bodies crushed as if by *something*, and bodies whose figure looked as if dissolved by potent chemicals,

Initially, the police assumed all of these to be part of a serial murder case.

This is because the incidents occurred one after another, and also because of the bizarre nature that is common to all crimes.

However, they could find nothing in common among the victims except that they were residents of the town.

Furthermore, clues from the bizarre deaths confused the investigation team.

Even if gasoline was poured over an entire body and set ablaze, it would be difficult to completely carbonize a human being. There is also the intensity of the foul odor emitted when a human burns.

However, at the scene, not only did no one notice any strange odor, but no traces of fire were found in the vicinity either.

The only explanation for this was that perhaps the humans had been instantaneously carbonized by a temperature of ten thousand degrees.

The same was true for the frozen bodies.

Initially, it was thought that the bodies had been frozen to death somewhere and then dumped at the site, but the bodies showed no signs of frostbite, a characteristic symptom of death from frost.

The forensic report stated that the murders were impossible without dousing the entire body in liquid nitrogen.

In other words, from a common-sense perspective, these crimes were impossible to perform by ordinary people.

(However...)

Hattori's gaze shifted beyond the front windshield.

The patrol car passed through Joy Street on the right and made a right turn, continuing straight ahead.

(Someone did it...)

At the second intersection, the patrol car turned right again. A long fence came into view on the right.

"As always, there seems to be no night or day there." The officer's voice sounded impressed.

Beyond the fence were planted greenery, a magnificent fountain on the right, and a dome building with a huge parabolic antenna pointing towards the sky on the left. Behind it, a five-story building that looked like an S from above loomed. Right now, light was leaking from most of the windows of that building. It had the atmosphere of a Nightless City.

"Seems that way"

He glanced at the new-looking building with disinterest.

This was the SEBEC building, which had been built in Mikage-cho a while ago.

SEBEC stands for **Saeki Electronics & Biological & Energy Corporation**. It is also part of the Saeki Group, a conglomerate chaired by Kozo Saeki, one of Japan's leading entrepreneurs.

SEBEC is known to the public as a company that forms the core of "Saeki Group's" new businesses.

In particular, the new branch office in Mikage-cho is said to have attracted many top-class researchers from around the world who are conducting various kinds of research.

(Or perhaps...)

Suddenly, something flashed in Hattori's mind.

(If only we had facilities as good as SEBEC's...)

The forensics said it was impossible for ordinary humans to commit such crimes. But what if cutting-edge scientific technology had been used?

To what end?

"A lunatic with research-grade facilities might be the culprit..."

People like that only exist in TV shows or movies.

It's not realistic.

Thus, Hattori dismissed the thought.

However, just then, Hattori's body shook in a big jolt.

"What's wrong!?" Matsumoto slammed on the brakes and stopped the car.

"Inspector, th-there!"

Beyond the front windshield, a figure could be seen.

A young girl in black clothes with a black ribbon was walking towards them in the middle of the road!

"At this time of night?"

"Anyway, it's dangerous. Let's protect her."

Hattori opened the door and jumped out.

But the girl who should have been right in front of them was nowhere to be seen.

"What's going on?"

"She... she disappeared. Just now, right in front of my eyes!" Matsumoto, still gripping the steering wheel, exclaimed in fear.

"Nonsense. She probably just ran off somewhere."

"N-No, it's true. Just now, she vanished like smoke."

"You lost sight of her in black clothes, in this darkness."

Hattori looked around.

The car had stopped just near the Alaya Shrine. At this time, there were only streetlights in this area, which was far from the main street. If she was wearing black clothes, it wouldn't be surprising if she disappeared from sight.

"She looked at my face and laughed before disappearing..."

The officer stepped out of the door with a skeptical look on his face.

"It was like...she was laughing so coldly"

"Maybe she got scared when she saw the patrol car. She's just a child. In any case, we need to find her and protect her."

In order to protect the little girl in black, both men searched for her.

But there was not a soul in sight.

"Not here"

Matsumoto shone his flashlight around.

"This is a child's foot. She couldn't have gone that far..."

"Perhaps, Inspector, she's a child from one of the houses around here?"

"That could be."

If she suddenly ran into a nearby house, that would explain it.

Then, there would be no need to worry.

And just as Hattori was rethinking, a sound echoed in his ears as if from the depths of the earth.

"H-Hey"

"Just now, that was..."

Not only Hattori, but Matsumoto, too, could hear it.

It sounded biological, similar to the roar of a wild beast.

"It came from the direction of Alaya Shrine."

The officer nodded with a stiff expression.

There was something that struck Hattori's mind. It was a detective's intuition.

"Let's go. We might be able to find clues to the Alaya Shrine incident"

"N-No, there's no way"

"We just don't know yet. But, just to be safe, you go back to the car and contact the station."

"What about you, Inspector?"

"I'll head to the shrine first. After you're done contacting the station, come over."

"Y-Yes."

The officer replied with a salute.

Alaya Shrine is located in the middle of a residential area in the southwest part of the town, in Mikage District One. It is known as a shrine dedicated to the "God that reside in people's hearts"

Hattori passed through the towering torii gate and walked past the guardian dogs.

The precinct, illuminated only by a single streetlight, was dimly lit. In the darkness ahead, he spotted the young girl in black he had seen earlier.

"What is she doing in a place like this..."

Of all places, Hattori thought, this was where gruesome murders had occurred recently. Still, he approached her, intending to protect her.

But to his surprise, upon closer inspection, he noticed a man standing beside her.

(What? Is her father with her?)

He felt relieved.

But why were they here at this hour, in this place?

(Could it be a kidnapping?)

With that thought, he stepped closer to the pair, intending to speak to them.

"You two..."

As he called out to them, an unbelievable sight caught Hattori's eyes

"W-What is this!"

In front of the father and daughter, a grotesque creature unlike anything he had ever seen before was flying.

"A monster!"

It was unlike any animal he had ever witnessed.

Above the creature's neck, which resembled a bird with purple and gold feathers, was the face of an old man.

Yes, it was an old man's head on a bird's body.

And there were two of them, hovering over the heads of the pair, as if about to prey on their throats with their sharp claws.

"Look out!"

Hattori quickly pulled a gun from the holster hanging left on his chest.

And then, he fired.

A bullet hit one of the monstrous birds, causing it to fall to the ground with a dying shriek.

The last standing bird came rushing towards Hattori.

"Move, Inspector!"

Matsumoto's startled voice came from behind him.

"W-What is this monster!"

The creature's eyes widened. And at the same time, a shockwave struck them.

"Matsumoto, watch out!"

Hattori quickly hid behind the guardian dog statue. But Matsumoto's body took the brunt of the shockwave.

In an instant, his body was torn in half from the stomach, as if cut by a guillotine.

"O-Officer Matsumoto!"

Matsumoto's upper body crumpled to the ground, splattering blood and guts everywhere.

"I-Inspector....What the....hell is happening..."

With only his upper body left, Matsumoto uttered those words, only to then die.

His lower body took a step or two forward before losing its balance and collapsed.

"Damn it!"

Hattori kept shooting.

So this was the culprit behind the dismemberment murders!

Even as he struggled to believe it, he emptied the rest of his bullets into the creature.

"Are you okay?"

Hattori addressed the father and daughter he had protected.

The monstrous bird's dying screams still burned fresh in his ears.

"This place is dangerous. Come with me..."

He spoke towards the Father. Who, visible in the twilight, was also dressed in black, just as the little girl.

But just as he spoke, the figure of the little girl disappeared into the darkness as if swallowed by it.

"What in the world..."

It was beyond words.

Moreover, the father seemed unconcerned about his daughter's disappearance. Under the twilight, the face of the man in black became visible.

"The mirthless eyes of this man... I've seen them somewhere before."

Somehow, Hattori recognized that face.

But the man, seemingly indifferent to his suspicions, looked down at the corpse lying at his feet.

"Quite skilled, aren't you?"

Upon hearing that voice, Hattori recalled the man's name.

(Takahisa Kandori, the president of SEBEC's Mikage Branch!?)

There was no mistaking it. He's seen his face several times.

(No way...everything up until now...has all been SEBEC's doing!?)

Then, this bird is...

In Hattori's mind, scenes of genetic experiments he had seen on TV surfaced. Experiments in which new life is created by combining genes.

Was this monstrous bird created by SEBEC?!?

What if the murder of the five delinquents at Alaya was the work of a bird created by SEBEC?!

No, all the other murders may be the same!

But for what purpose?

Corporations might commit killings for the sake of increasing profits, but they wouldn't commit murder for the sake of murder.

The more a company becomes a research institute such as SEBEC, the further away it gets from such acts...

However...

One word came to mind.

(Human experimentation?!)

"It seems you've figured out who I am" the man said, wearing a sinister smile.

"Takahisa Kandori, I'd like you to accompany me to the station as a person of interest"

But instead of answering, Kandori muttered something under his breath.

It reached Hattori's ears as:

P e r s o n a

"!?"

Something mist-like emerged from Kandori's back. The mist enveloped his body as if it were alive.

"W-What is this fog!"

Hattori thought Kandori had employed some trick to distract him and escape. But the next moment, an unbelievable sight covered Hattori's eyes.

"Where is this...?"

Shrouded in fog under the moonlight, he found himself in a void deeper than the darkness of the night.

Utterly surrounded by the dark, the abyss—the void.

This wasn't just mere darkness.

It could only be described as if floating in a space without an end.

And beyond that, Kandori also floated.

"Welcome to the Great Abyssal Dark" Kandori smiled coldly. "Soon, the world will be this darkness itself"

But he couldn't hear all of his words.

The moment Hattori saw the shadow emerging from Kandori's back, his heartbeat stopped.

"President, this is..."

From behind him, men in black appeared.

And they noticed the two corpses in front of Kandori.

"Just garbage" There was a hint of contempt in his dismissive tone.

"What about *them*?" Kandori inquired.

"Hah. We've contained all the ones that we succeeded in controlling. As for the rest, we..."

"Disposed of them?"

"Indeed"

Kandori, with his left hand in his slacks pocket, looked down at the Toufei's corpse lying on the ground.

"It's a shame. His power was almost in our hands."

If these men hadn't shown up, negotiations would have succeeded smoothly.

"...Everything has been disposed of, including the witnesses"

"Good, let's withdraw."

"President, I thought I saw the girl in black clothes, but..."

"Ah, you mean Aki... Don't worry about her. She won't interfere with us."

Kandori nodded in satisfaction.

At that moment, an electronic sound came from Kandori's breast pocket.

"It seems everything is ready," he muttered, taking out his cellphone from his breast pocket.

"It's me." Facing the phone, he spoke. "I see...we've reached it's critical point and stabilized it. So, what does the Doctor say? Should be good to go."

With that, he hung up.

The question, Kandori wondered, was to what extent Dr. Nicolai would be able to block the external energy waves and activate the Deva System, as he wanted minimize the effects of those waves.

Then, and only then, would his true purpose be accomplished.

Even his subordinates here do not know that.

And they don't need to know.

"The time for judgment has come. And now, no one can run away from it..."

Before he knew it, the demon's corpse had disappeared, leaving only two corpses behind.

CHAPTER I

TAKAHISA KANDORI'S LIGHT AND SHADOW

About ten months ago, in the grand hall of the SEBEC building located in Mikage-cho Second District, a ceremony was taking place.

It could have been called a party celebrating the completion of the new branch office.

The guests included not only SEBEC executives, but also Saeki Group executives, representatives of companies doing business with SEBEC, and the media.

In the center of the venue, were arranged various dishes of Japanese, Western, and Chinese cuisine, prepared in the kitchen of a top-class hotel. Surrounding these dishes were about twenty round tables, each adorned with beer and juice.

Champagne-filled glasses were being distributed to the guests by a dozen or so hall attendants, moving gracefully and efficiently, having been brought in specifically for this occasion from a top-class hotel.

Among them, there was one man, dressed in an elegant lemon-yellow suit with a wine-red tie just the same as the other attendants, who stood out due to a certain roughness emanating from his demeanor.

"Kido-kun this won't do," A man with his hand nervously resting on his glasses whispered in his ear, "Our hotel is famous for its prestige, you know."

"Hah?"

He looked at the man with an expression of not knowing what was he talking about.

"Even if you're a temporary part-timer, you need to move with more grace and elegance"

The plate attached to the chest of the man giving the instructions read as 'Arakawa', an employee of the hotel. He's the on-site chief for this party.

"I intend to, Chief..."

"Anyway, stop looking around so constantly and glaring at people like that. Got it?"

"Understood."

"And also, serve champagne to the guests over there."

"Yes, right away."

With a nod, Kido made his way through the crowd of guests, mindful of his balance as he held the tray with champagne glasses, and left the presence of the Chief.

In no time at all, all two hundred or so attendees held glasses in their hands.

The champagne provided was of the finest quality, chilled to the perfect drinking temperature.

Currently, all eyes holding glasses were directed towards the stage at the front. Standing slightly hunched in front of the microphone at the center of the stage was a stout, obese man.

It was the Minister of International Trade and Industry, Yashuhiro Komori.

"...Therefore, as someone who constantly oversees the advancement of science and technology, I have great expectations for SEBEC's development, which serves as the core of the Saeki Group..."

Komori, who was about to hold the next election, was taking this opportunity to promote himself.

The hall attendants, including Kido, began lining up against the walls in preparation for the speech's conclusion. That is because as soon as it ended, they would be ready to serve wine, water, and soft drinks to the guests.

"I messed up" Arakawa, standing next to Kido, lamented in a whisper. "The champagne's temperature was set based on calculations taking in consideration that the politician's speeches were going to be long"

Arakawa glanced at the clock mounted at the front of the hall.

"I calculated for a five-minute speech to be just enough, but it's already been over twenty. At this rate, the beer will become lukewarm..."

However, such whines did not reach Kido's ears.

His eyes were searching all over the venue with great intensity, with his entire attention wholly focused on this task.

"What's more, Chairman Saeki had done a wonderful job appointing a promising twenty-eight-year-old to be the head of the Mikage branch..."

Kido's ears perked up at the mention.

It's him... It's about him...

Kido involuntarily furrowed his brow.

The cross-shaped scar on his forehead twitched.

II

Meanwhile, while Minister Komori's lengthy speech continued, a secret experiment was being conducted in another part of the same building.

Behind a locked steel door, in a room filled with complex electronic equipment never seen before, researchers in white coats were tapping away at keyboards, each peering at computer displays.

On the wall beyond those displays, a giant LCD screen displayed images of a device.

An elderly man gazed upon it with deep emotion.

The device on the other side of the screen was located deep within a space equivalent to three floors in height. Its shape resembled a truncated cone. If one were to make a comparison, it bore a resemblance to the atmospheric entry pod of a space rocket once used by NASA.

In front, there seemed to be something resembling a steel door.

Around it, about five white-coated researchers and technicians gathered, focusing on the device slightly to the left, pressing red and blue buttons alternately. Every time they pressed the buttons, the door of the device would open and close.

"Dr. Nikolai, the adjustment of the gate mechanism is complete" reported the woman facing the display screen in English to the white-coated old man. She was a white-clad woman who wore glasses and held an intelligent demeanor within her.

"With that, the circuits of the DVA System are all connected"

"Is it finished...?"

The old man that called himself Doctor Nikolai, who appeared to be in his mid-thirties, turned to look at her.

"Shall we begin checking the power unit?"

At those words, the old man nodded contentedly.

"Yes, Doctor."

"Very well, Setsuko Sonomura. Start the energy supply."

Setsuko Sonomura called up the energy supply program on the display and pressed the start key.

Ten white bars appeared on the display.

It was a monitor of the operating status of ten power units.

The white bars gradually turned green from left to right. Green indicated that power was being supplied to the system. Once the green bars turned red left and right, with the red portion exceeding fifty percent of the bar, the power would be automatically cut off. Red indicated an overload.

"All green, Doctor."

"Alright, just as planned"

Dr. Nikolai looked satisfied as he gazed at the device beyond the LCD screen.

III

"...And with that, then, cheers!"

Finally, the Minister raised his glass overhead.

As all the attendees echoed him and sipped from their glasses, applause rang out from all over. The hall attendants began to move, serving various drinks and replacing ashtrays. Arakawa, however, remained with a grim expression as he recalculated the arrangements that would proceed from now on.

"Young Master, shall I go and get the dishes?"

After the toast, an elderly man with almost gray hair spoke in a polite tone to the young man next to him. He wore what seemed to be reading glasses and had a well-kept moustache (almost as white as his hair) around his mouth.

His attitude toward the young man was full of respect, as if he were helping him with something.

"Please, Yamaoka"

The young man nodded, softening his stern gaze behind his glasses. He wore a bright blue scarf hanging from the neckline of his gray collared St. Hermelin uniform, and he slicked back part of his hair like a lion's mane on purpose.

His name was Kei Nanjo.

He was the heir to the Nanjo Konzern and naturally expected to become the future leader of the very same.

Today, in place of his father, he was attending the ceremony with his butler Yamaoka, as his father was currently on an overseas inspection.

The history of Nanjo Konzern is long.

Its roots are said to date back to the Muromachi period.

From the upheavals of Nanbokucho, through the Sengoku Period and into the Edo Period, the Nanjo family has been connected to the imperial court and feudal lords.

It is said that during the Meiji Restoration, the Nanjo family even financially supported the new government.

After the war, GHQ's order to dismantle zaibatsu led to the independence of most of the various corporate groups from the Konzern, but even today the Nanjo family still holds significant influence over the political and economic spheres, including various corporate groups and the government.

"However..."

With a glass of soft drink in his hand, Nanjo looked at the man in front of the stage shaking hands with the minister.

"The fact that he's become the branch manager..."

It seemed surprising even to the other guests, as whispers circulated around him.

"The executives couldn't stay quiet about this personnel decision."

"Even though it's the weakest company within the Saeki Group, it's surprising to have such a young branch manager."

"Apparently, he's the chairman's favorite."

"Is that so?"

"Otherwise, he wouldn't be in such a position at all, would he?"

"Oh, you watch your mouth."

"Yeah, you never know who might be listening..."

The men kept their voices down.

Nanjo couldn't hear anything else.

(There seems to be a lot going on inside Saeki...)

Somehow, the nuance of the conversation was conveyed to Nanjo.

Seems to be the same for all companies.

At that moment, Yamaoka returned with dishes in hand.

"Please enjoy the meal, Young Master"

"Thank you"

Nanjo placed his glass on the table and accepted the plate from Yamaoka.

"Oh, it seems the branch manager's speech is about to begin."

On stage, the host announced the name of the new branch manager of SEBEC.

At those words, Nanjo also shifted his gaze to the stage.

A man in black handed a drink glass to the female hall attendant and slowly walked up the stairs leading to the stage.

"Why would Chairman Saeki go this far for him...?"

Nanjo couldn't believe it.

The name of the man in black is Takahisa Kandori.

At just twenty-eight years old, he had become the new branch manager of SEBEC's new office.

A graduate of England's Oxford University with a doctorate in economics, law, and sociology, his credentials alone warranted him the status of a business elite.

"I don't like this..." Nanjo muttered to himself.

It wasn't about him becoming a branch manager at twenty-eight, but rather, there was a particular air around Kandori himself that made Nanjo uneasy, although Yamaoka didn't interpret it that way.

"Chairman Saeki was indebted to Kandori's father, perhaps that may be it"

Kandori's father was a politician.

After returning to Japan, Kandori moved in with Saeki Kozo, who was a close friend of his father.

"Yamaoka, that kind of thing happens all the time. That's not a bad thing." Nanjo thought.

I, too, will probably be sent off to study abroad after I graduate from college, and then I might follow a similar path as the heir to the Nanjo Konzern.

Besides, it's wrong for people to envy or criticize other's situations. Since it's easy to overlook the pressure that is placed on them.

Take myself, for example.

There must have been many benefits to being the heir to the Nanjo konzern, there's no denying that.

However, no one except Yamaoka knows how much it has taken away from me.

Nanjo continued his words without mentioning such matters.

"It's just that, I just sense some kind of malice from that man"

"Malice?"

"Have you ever looked into his eyes?"

Yamaoka shook his head.

"Thanks to attending various parties like this, I've seen politicians, businessmen, government officials, and even celebrities"

"Observing others is necessary for a successor"

"And that is why, I've done plenty" Nanjo nodded. "However, I just can't like that man's eyes."

People have a glint in their eyes.

Especially those with strong ambitions have a burning fire like the blazing sun in their eyes.

This can be seen in any human being.

Nanjo had been continuing observing people as Yamaoka mentioned.

He has told him that if you were to peer into the eyes of another person being introduced to you at a party, you can see their liveliness.

Those with a strong gleam in their eyes still have room to grow. And those with a dim glimmer are weak of heart.

That's what Yamaoka taught him.

Because of this, Nanjo didn't have a good feeling about Kandori.

His eyes...

"It's as if he's hiding something."

"Ambition often comes with that"

"..."

Nanjo didn't argue with that.

Indeed, Kandori could be described as ambitious.

Even from a distance, one can sense that this has become even stronger now that he has become branch manager.

(But if that's the case...)

Why does his eyes only have a dark, lifeless gleam?

Because of the lack of vitality in his eyes, Kandori's almost like a god of death....

I don't want to look at those eyes any longer.

Nanjo placed his plate on the table with a clink and whispered into Yamaoka's ear.

"Yamaoka, let's go home"

But right on the podium, Kandori's speech had already begun.

"B-but, Young master. The speech is starting now..."

Yamaoka was flustered.

"Doesn't matter. I've already fulfilled my role as my father's substitute"

"W-well, yes, that's true indeed."

After placing the plate on the table, Nanjo began to stride towards the door with Yamaoka hurriedly rushing after him.

(Regardless, I just don't like him...)

IV

Kandori continued his speech on stage with a confident demeanor.

"Research in remote mountain villages is meaningless. All research results must contribute to the improvement of human life. That's why we've established a branch with top-notch research facilities in Mikage-cho"

Kandori glanced at the invited guests. Most of them, including Seta Ward's Mayor who had welcomed SEBEC's advances, seemed satisfied with Kandori's speech, nodding approvingly.

"Let me assure you that SEBEC will give back to this town the fruits of the latest technology"

With that, Kandori concluded his speech.

A whirlwind of applause filled the venue as Kandori bowed and left the stage.

"Boss"

A beautiful woman approached him, holding a glass of water in her hand.

"Thank you, Miyashita-kun"

Kandori accepted the offered glass.

The beautiful woman wore a form-fitting red suit, with her legs slenderly stretched out in a tight skirt.

Her name is Mayo Miyashita, a twenty-five-year-old woman serving as Kandori's secretary.

"That was quite the speech."

"Is that so?"

"I mean, look over there..."

She gestured with the glass towards a group.

"The district mayors?"

"They seem eager for SEBEC's contribution to the local community."

"Hmm" Kandori snickered, "*Parasites*"

"Hello, President Kandori"

A slightly balding middle-aged man, surrounded by a few men, approached Kandori.

"This is the ward chief, and the assistant commissioners"

Kandori raised his glass in greeting to them.

"We were deeply impressed by your wonderful speech. We hope SEBEC will revitalize this town"

"We are grateful that a leading Japanese corporation like SEBEC has established a branch in a place like this."

"After all, it's a ward with low tax revenue..."

They tried to appease Kandori with words while rubbing their hands together.

"In any case..."

Kandori interrupted them with his right hand.

"SEBEC plans to make a small donation to the district at a later date."

"I-Is that so?"

"We already have Chairman Saeki's approval"

"We appreciate it, Branch Manager Kandori"

"It's nothing. It's common practice for American and European companies to spend money for local development. If you ask me, Japanese companies are too indifferent to such matters."

Kandori nodded magnanimously.

"As for the amount, my secretary Miyashita will contact you later"

At those words, their eyes focused on Miyashita.

As if aware, she smiled gracefully and spoke,

"I assure you it'll be a sum that won't disappoint."

They showed relief at her words.

V

There was a man observing the exchange.

It was the hall attendant—Kido.

"I'll never forget this wound's grudge"

As if confirming it to himself, he touched his forehead with his left hand.

"If I'm going to do it, now's the time"

Kido, holding a tray with drinks, approached them.

"Ah, you, cut my drink if you please"

An assistant official called out to him as he approached. However, Kido didn't respond.

"Y-You"

The official was angered by being ignored, but his emotions quickly turned to fear.

The hall attendant held a sharp blade in his hand.

"Y-Yooooou!"

The assistant screamed and collapsed on the spot.

At the same time, the sound of a glass shattering echoed.

Kido had thrown away the tray he was holding with his left hand right on the spot.

Everyone in the hall heard the sound, turning to see where it came from.

And then, they were left speechless.

"Kandori!!!"

In the silent space, only Kido's loud angered voice rang out.

With a gaze full of hatred, Kido pointed his knife at Kandori.

Screams rose from the surrounding guests as they noticed.

"Die!!!"

Kido, putting all his weight on gripping the knife tightly with both hands, aimed for Kandori's heart.

Their distance was no more than a few steps away.

The tip of the knife shone.

At that moment, everyone believed that the young branch manager had been stabbed by the man's deadly blade.

But by a hair's breadth, Kandori dodged the knife.

"!?"

Kido stumbled from the momentum, and at the same time, Kandori's right hand formed a knifehand strike and knocked the knife out of Kido's hand. It all happened in the blink of an eye.

"You again?"

Kandori stared coldly into the eyes of the man who had attacked him with a clear look of disdain.

"I-I'll kill you, Kandori"

As soon as he regained his posture, Kido quickly aimed his right fist at Kandori.

However, Kandori was quick to move.

And so, Kandori's right foot delivered a powerful kick to Kido's abdomen.

"Guh!"

The tip of his shoe sank into Kido's solar plexus. Kido's face contorted in pain as he staggered forward, falling towards Kandori's feet.

It seemed like the match was over, but Kido smirked.

That had been a distraction. Kido's aim was to pretend to fall down, grab the knife from the floor, and instantly pierce Kandori's heart when he least expected it.

However, Kandori hadn't missed Kido's momentary smile.

Just as Kido was about to grab the knife, Kandori's kicked it away.

"Worthless"

"Tch...Damn...you...!"

Quickly, Kido placed all of his remaining strength into his right foot, which was weighted on the right side of his collapsing body, and with a twist of his hips, he delivered a razor-sharp left uppercut to Kandori's chin.

Truly, it was an attack only someone experienced in fighting could execute. Everyone present thought Kandori's jaw would shatter.

But instead, Kido's fist cut through the air in vain

(What!?)

Kido couldn't believe it. He was sure that he had hit him.

"A futile effort"

Coldly dismissing Kido, Kandori sent a swift punch to Kido's unprotected right cheek, knocking him off balance from his impossible position.

"Ugh!"

A pained groan escaped from Kido.

The blow knocked him unconscious and he collapsed head first onto the floor.

"Boss, are you alright!?" Miyashita came to her senses and called out to Kandori.

"Of course"

"That boy again..."

"What a nuisance"

With indifference, Kandori handed Kido's body over to the men of SS - SEBEC Security Services, who had infiltrated the venue in civilian clothes for security purposes.

"Dispose of him outside as usual"

"B-But he attempted to assassinate you, Branch Manager..."

One of the two black-suited men holding Kido's arms expressed disbelief at the order.

"I don't care. More importantly..."

"I understand"

Miyashita exchanged looks with Kandori.

VI

“Assistant Numata, please begin”

Dr. Nikolai urged Assistant Numata, Assistant Asada, and five other staff members standing by on the other side of the LCD screen to begin the experiment.

"Understood" Numata, standing in front of the control console for the Deva System, replied.

Their exchange was transmitted to all staff through microphones and speakers.

"Now, we will close all field partitions in the experimental facility."

A researcher sitting next to Sonomura reported to the doctor.

"But is it safe...?"

A nervous-looking man in a navy blue suit standing next to Dr. Nikolai observed the situation.

“No problem, Yamanaka.”

Nikolai reassured Yamanaka with a pat on the shoulder, showing him a reassuring expression, and began to explain the details of the experiment.

"Hey, Sonomura-kun, what is the doctor saying?"

Yamanaka was taken aback by the sudden explanation.

Although he was the director of the research institute, he could not speak English.

Sonomura, however, seemed to be concentrating on the operation of the experiment and did not seem to hear Yamanaka's call.

"Well, never mind..."

Yamanaka reluctantly put on a smile as usual, pretending to listen.

(Either way, this facility is for the Doctor after all...)

Although he held the position of head of the institute, Yamanaka hardly understood what research was being conducted here.

He was merely a support role for this elderly genius's research, essentially a handyman as the director.

His job was to manage research budgets and schedules, and it can be said that Kandori selected him, when he was the manager of the general affairs department, for this purpose.

Although his constant flattery towards Kandori had earned him disdain from the researchers, he didn't care at all.

(Anyway, whatever happens, it's the Doctor's and Branch Manager Kandori's responsibility)

It wasn't something he knew.

Yamanaka decided to handle it as usual.

He didn't want to risk losing the special position given to him by Kandori by prying too much.

In preparation for unforeseen circumstances, all the doors of the research facilities were locked, and iron pipes were extended in front of the doors to reinforce the door locks. Then, the men in front of the Deva System began to move.

"Open the gate and let the guinea pigs in"

Numata operated the controls and opened the transfer gate.

"You, get this one to the gate"

He pointed to a wired cage containing a rabbit inside. The rabbit was placed into the gate while still in the cage.

Then, the gate closed.

Dr. Nikolai stared at it intently.

"The Deva System will be activated shortly"

The old man nodded vigorously.

"But, is it okay? Today is supposed to be a test of the power unit's output..."

"It doesn't matter. Future experiments may be compromised if we don't actually activate the system and know the energy load on the device. Simulation alone won't reveal everything."

The Jewish old man introduced himself as C.W. Nicolai.

He's a genius scientist who proposed his own theory of spatial phase research. The theory hypothesized that by adding artificial energy to space, it would be possible to swap the relative coordinate axes of space.

If this were proven, instantaneous transfer of matter would become possible.

The doctor had already demonstrated this theory through computer simulations and had called for the development and experimentation of this device with research institutions around the world. However, despite the groundbreaking nature of his research, no institution had accepted it.

Reason being—the amount of energy used in experiments.

Experimentation required enough electricity to power an entire metropolis. The need for such power posed not only economic issues but also safety concerns.

If the experiment were to go awry and this energy were to go out of control, damage on the level of a nuclear explosion could be expected.

Although the doctor's research was theoretically complete, this great risk had kept it in limbo for nearly ten years.

That is, until Kandori lent a helping hand.

And now, thanks to SEBEC's full support, the experimental device—**Dimension Variable Accelerator System**, or **DVA** System for short—was finally about to start its first experiment.

“Well, I don't think we'll be able to expect much from today's experiment...”

The doctor agreed as he gave instructions to Sonomura.

VII

As Reiji returned home from elementary school, he found his mother groveling on the ground of the living room. She kept apologizing as his drunken father repeatedly kicked her.

"You! You don't deserve to live, worthless piece of trash! Die! Die right now!!"

His father continued to kick his mother with an ogreish expression.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

And his mother just kept apologizing to his father.

"Do you think that'll be enough to quell my anger?"

Saying so, his father stepped on his mother's head with his foot.

"Don't you dare lay a hand on Mom!"

Reiji removed his backpack and swung it with all his might towards his father. It unexpectedly dealt a blow to his father, who had his back turned to Reiji.

Losing his balance, his father was knocked to the ground.

"Mom, are you okay?!"

Immediately, Reiji helped his mother up.

"Reiji, you brat!"

A terrifyingly angry expression was directed at Reiji.

"Reiji, what are you doing! Apologize to your father!"

Pushing away Reiji's hand trying to help her up, his mother also pressed Reiji's head onto the floor alongside hers.

"Please forgive him, dear. Please forgive his impudence."

His mother desperately continued to press their heads to the floor as if protecting Reiji.

"He needs to be disciplined properly..." The man spat out, "It's something a despicable woman like you would do. Using a child with my blood to raise a hand against me..."

"N-no, it's not like that..."

While pressing their heads to the floor together, Reiji's eyes darted around.

Reiji couldn't understand.

Why didn't his mother put up any resistance?

And, what was his father doing?

The boy glanced up at his father.

Unbeknownst to him, his father was gripping a golf club in his right hand. It was a practice club he kept in the living room.

"Chie, look up."

The man nudged his mother's head with the golf club, making her do as indicated and look up at him.

"You traitor."

His father directed a sharp gaze at his mother.

"I thought you were the only woman who was faithful to me..."

"Please forgive me. Please forgive me."

His mother continued to apologize to his father while pressing her head to the floor, begging for his forgiveness.

It was a pitiful sight...

"No, I won't forgive you. You did this to me"

His father, within a crazed momentum, raised the golf club.

"S-stop!"

Reiji's eyes caught the sight of the golf club approaching his mother at incredible force.

"Mom!"

At this rate, my mother! Will die!

Just as Reiji thought this, he pushed his mother away.

It was an unconscious action driven by his desire to protect her.

The next moment, Reiji felt a dull impact on his head.

At the same time, he heard shouting from afar.

"It's for the medical expenses. Get treatment at that hospital over there."

He saw something fluttering down. It was several bills, ten-thousand-yen notes.

"If you ever do anything like this again, it won't end well for you."

A man in a black suit peeked out from the back seat window of a Benz, menacingly staring at Reiji. Then, the car drove off from in front of Reiji.

(A dream...?)

Reiji realized he was lying on the ground. Apparently, he had been knocked out and thrown from the car while unconscious.

"Damn it..."

He slowly tried to lift himself up, trying to protect his aching body. But the muscles in his body refused to move due to the pain.

"Compared to back then, this is nothing..."

Leaning against a wall for support, Reiji desperately tried to stand up. He staggered a few times, but eventually managed to stand.

Reiji Kido was born as the child of a mistress.

He remembers his mother was kept as such by a particular man.

Whenever the man visited Reiji's home, he was always drunk.

And despite coming in the late hours of night, he would loudly berate Reiji's mother.

He could never understand why his mother simply endured everything in silence.

However, when he heard that the man was actually regarded as a strict and upright politician, he couldn't believe it even as a child.

"Damn you, Kandori Kensuke"

Reiji spoke the name of a man with hatred.
Every time he uttered that man's name, the cross-shaped scar on Reiji's forehead ached.

Kensuke Kandori.

A Minister of Justice, known for his thorough condemnation of corruption in the political world and for issuing arrest orders against the corruption of the Prime Minister at the time, he was a young politician who didn't succumb to various political pressures.

Reiji hated that man.

"All while you're makin' me and Mom suffer..."

Kensuke Kandori was the one who inflicted the cross-shaped scar on his forehead...

That pain... I'll never forget it.

The golf club that struck down on him that time stained his forehead with blood.

If it had hit directly, he would have died instantly.

Fortunately, it only left just a cut on his forehead.

And thanks to that, he was left with a cross-shaped scar on his forehead that would last for life.

"Because of you, Mom was..."

They were always left in the shadows.

The more Kensuke Kandori stepped into the limelight as a politician, the deeper their shadow became.

As he gained attention as a prominent politician who pursued scandals and the corruption of corrupt politicians, for Kensuke, the existence of this family was like his Achilles' heel concerning his political life.

During that time, Reiji came to the realization he was the child of a mistress.

Back then, when he saw the image of his father on TV...

His surname was different.

The name displayed beneath his father's image on TV was Kensuke Kandori, even though the nameplate outside the house read "Kido"

When Reiji told his mother that the TV got his father's name wrong, his mother simply smiled weakly at Reiji without saying anything else.

What did his mother feel in her heart back then?

Reiji could imagine.

She must have been very sad...

It seemed that Kensuke Kandori started to become violent against his mother around that time.

Reiji despised Kensuke Kandori for sneaking into the house to violently assault his mother. His hatred grew in proportion as Kensuke Kandori's name kept rising in the political world.

What law-abiding man are you? What kind of honorable politician are you?

Reiji's hatred for Kensuke increased ever since he received the scar on his forehead. As long as Kensuke Kandori was alive, his mother would have to live under the shadow of this man for the rest of her life.

In that case, then I will kill this man with my own hands and set my mother free.

Reiji didn't remember when he made that vow.

However, it was left unfulfilled.

When he entered junior high, Kensuke Kandori suddenly died while campaigning.

The cause of death was acute heart failure, caused by overwork.

It was some time after that his aimless hatred turned towards Kensuke's son, Takahisa Kandori.

"The Kandori family is our enemy, of Mom, and I. I won't give up on this."

Fierce colors flashed in Reiji's eyes.

"I will definitely kill you, Kandori..."

VIII

Mayo Miyashita rode the elevator with a tired expression.

Behind her stood men in navy suits, looking exhausted.

Eventually, the elevator doors opened.

"Chief, we'll stay here."

"Thank you. I'll be on the fifth floor."

She said to them as they left with a bow.

They were Mayo Miyashita's subordinates.

Mayo Miyashita is the secretary of Takahisa Kandori, the head of the SEBEC Mikage branch office, but she is also in charge of the Planning and Coordination Office, which is under the direct control of the branch office head.

The Planning and Coordination Office is in charge of all research and development budgets and personnel matters within the branch office, and also serves as a contact point for external parties.

"Anyway..." Mayo let out a sigh. "Why is that boy targeting the boss?"

It was a mystery to her.

(And his tone. Even though he's been attacked multiple times, he remains so calm...)

Upon reflection, Mayo realized she hardly knew anything about Kandori's private life.

Two years ago, Kandori joined the company through Chairman Saeki's introduction and was assigned to the Saeki Trading Secretariat where she worked.

Mayo was then twenty-two years old.

Although she had passed the secretarial examination while still a student at a national university and later joined the Saeki Corporation, she was fed up with menial chores and being a secretary in name only.

It was around this time that she began working side by side with Kandori, a 26-year-old graduate from a graduate school in England.

While teaching him practical work as a secretary, Mayo was fascinated by his cleverness, leading to them forming a relationship.

Unlike other people who only boasted about their academic backgrounds and titles, Kandori was attractive as a man and as a true business elite.

And because Mayo was charmed by him, she secretly used various means to support his advancement until today, all the way until he was transferred to SEBEC.

Her actions to spice up her boring daily life had now also elevated her to the rank of a business elite.

"Anyway, I can't let this go on"

If Kandori fell due to a scandal, it meant her downfall too.

She would return to her dull, boring daily life.

"This is no joke."

She muttered under her breath full of hatred for the past.

With a commotion such as this, she needed to understand his private life to some extent.

While Kandori hardly spoke about himself other than work, Mayo thought she understood his personality through their casual conversations.

However, when it came to Kandori's past before joining SEBEC, especially his childhood, Mayo was completely clueless.

The elevator doors opened.

(Anyway, things will be different from now on.)

Nodding to herself, she stepped out of the elevator.

Takahisa Kandori was at his desk in the branch manager's office on the fifth floor.

"Boss..."

Kandori looked up at the voice of his secretary, Miyashita.

"Just what was he...?"

Mayo stood beside the desk, staring at him with a slightly sulky expression.

"What are you talking about?"

"Please don't pretend you don't know"

There was a slight bite in her words.

"I'm just expressing my concern for you, Boss"

Her almond-shaped eyes lifted ever so slightly.

"We've finally come this far. If anything were to happen to the branch manager at this critical time..."

"And for that, I must thank you" Kandori's right hand rested on her fair hand.

"If it weren't for the Takazume network association that you put together, even with my expertise, I wouldn't be sitting in this seat."

"If that's the case..."

Miyashita's fingers intertwined with Kandori's. Her eyes held the poignant light of a wistful woman in them.

"Please tell me. Who exactly is that young man? What's your connection with him, and why is he targeting you, Boss?"

"Trivial reasons"

"But..."

Mayo persisted.

"He's attacked the branch manager not once or twice. Each time, we've handled it discreetly to avoid major incidents, but if this continues, someday, it could really turn into..."

"Certainly, there's a bit of a conundrum this time..."

The sudden attack had everyone's attention, causing significant turmoil among them.

The president of SEBEC was nearly stabbed at the party venue. It would be odd if it didn't cause a commotion.

"I never would've expected him to infiltrate in this manner. Reiji must have considered..."

"Is that what *his* name is...?"

Kandori nodded expressionlessly.

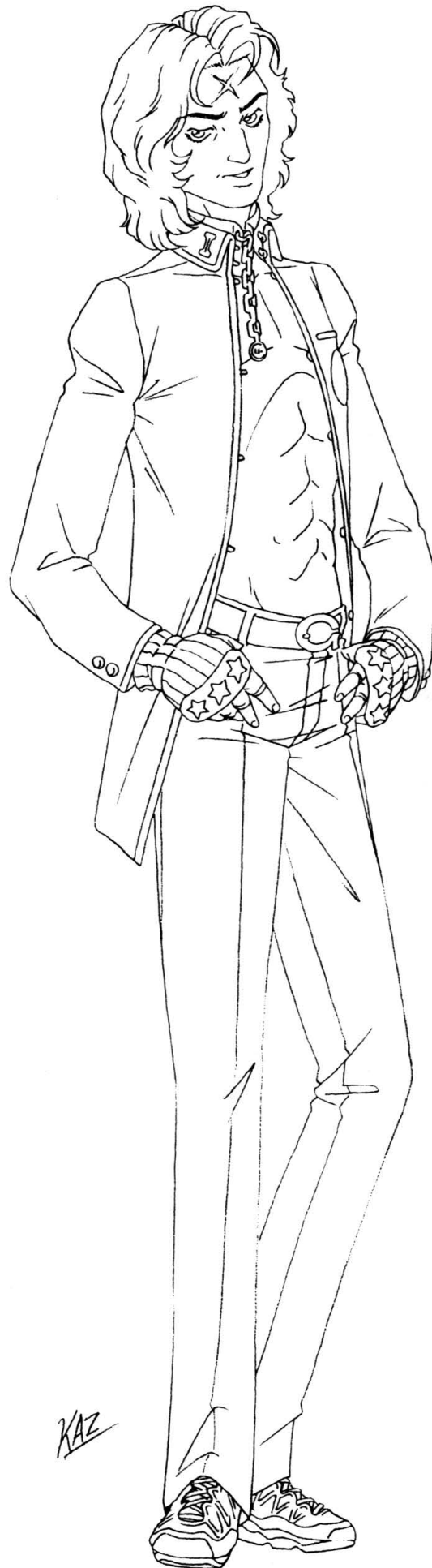
Reiji Kido.

He's Kandori's younger brother, about eleven years his junior.

They are half-siblings.

However, until recently, Kandori didn't even know he existed.

Only after his father's death did he find out about his existence.



Kandori was to take over the reigns of the family, and he heard about the existence of his younger brother from the mouth of his legal advisor.

Yes, Reiji Kido was a child his father sired with a mistress.

To think there was another side to my strict father...

When Kandori learned of Reiji's existence, he felt both surprised and disappointed in his father.

Was he just a snob after all?

Or was he led to this point due to the pressure he was suffering?

Kandori couldn't understand.

His father held an extreme belief in regards to the Kandori bloodline, believing it to be for the 'chosen ones'. He had instilled into him the importance of having the Kandori blood in his veins at every opportunity through his childhood.

The Kandori family, an old and prestigious lineage, had been in a position of dominance before and after the war, indeed, for ages.

Therefore, the heir of the Kandori family had to excel in everything. That was his father's motto, proof that one had inherited the blood of the chosen Kandori lineage. This applied not only to daily behavior but also to academics and sports; he was expected to be above others in every aspect.

In that sense, his father was the epitome of perfection.

From an early age, Kandori fought against the pressure of his father.

No matter how good his grades were, he was never praised.

And even if he made a mistake that anyone would have made, he would never be forgiven because he was of the Kandori bloodline.

He was under heavy pressure.

Pressure that lasted until he graduated from High school.

Thus, his father's existence was nothing but an object of hatred for him.

Kandori recalled Reiji Kido's eyes brimming with hatred.

(Those eyes are just like mine back then)

(But, why does he hate me?)

He did not know why.

If his father was playing another role to free himself from the pressure of the Kandori family, then...

Wouldn't Reiji Kido be happier than him?

"Boss, at least, please investigate that young man, Reiji."

At Miyashita's voice, Kandori snapped out of his thoughts.

"Do you really want to know that much, Miyashita?"

"To ensure the branch manager gains even greater power, I need to understand everything about you, Takahisa Kandori"

Mayo replied.

"Even if it's about your private life..."

"I see..."

"Don't you trust me, Boss?"

"No." He shook his head, "I've never seen a woman as trustworthy as you"

"In that case..."

"Fine." Kandori nodded, "Let's continue this discussion at my apartment..."

He took the hand of his capable secretary and pulled her towards him.

CHAPTER II

MAKI SONOMURA'S WORLD

I

After school on Saturday, in the art room, a girl with shoulder-length hair was alone by the window, spreading out a canvas.

Occasionally, the breeze coming in through the open window would ruffle the red ribbon in her hair.

"Wow, is that this year's poster?"

A voice came from behind her, facing the canvas.

"Ah, Chisato."

"Last year's poster was also very Maki-like, but this year's image is a bit different from before. Gives a bit of a surrealism vibe..."

"Is it a bit too grim?"

She asked for Chisato's opinion as she peered over her shoulder.

"Hnn...Kinda. But I think this kind of thing is good too. It's like the image of the inner heart of us high school students."

"What's inside of our hearts?"

"Yeah, because you're painting with that theme, right?"

"No, it's just an image that somehow came to mind."

"Hmm?"

Chisato carefully looked at the painting again, ignoring the confused Maki.

"I'm sure it is. If people see it, they'll definitely be moved by this painting. There's something in this painting that stimulates a vague sense of unease, or a feeling of sadness that lurks in people's hearts."

"Is that so..."

"But Maki, you're amazing. You've been such an artistic genius since your start in St. Hermelin..."

Chisato let out a sigh.

"And your grades are good too. With works like this, you'll surely get into any art school. I, on the other hand..."

"Oh, Chisato, you're not so bad either"

"No, I don't have talent like Maki's. Seriously, I'll be a third-year in six months, and I still don't know about my future..."

"Your future, huh."

Thinking about it, Maki realized she had never given any thought to what her future course would be.

"I'm fine as long as I can continue painting like this..."

As she mumbled, Chisato tapped Maki's shoulder.

"He's here."

"Huh?"

"Hey, are you still painting?"

A tall guy stood at the entrance of the art room.

"Yosuke-san"

"The club's over. Want to go home together?"

As he said that, he walked over to Maki.

"Then, I'll head home first." Said Chisato in a quiet whisper.

"Huh, but, Chisato..."

"I don't want to interrupt you two." Said Chisato with a smile and a laugh.

"See you on Monday, Maki. Bye, Naito-kun."

As she passed by Yosuke Naito, she left.

"It seems like I chased her away. Did I do something wrong?"

Yosuke watched Chisato's retreating figure with concern.

"It's okay."

"Is it?"

"Chisato is my best friend."

Maki smiled softly at Yosuke.

"Well, let's go home."

"Yeah." Maki nodded.

"Hey, Yosuke-san."

"What is it?"

"Actually..."

Maki took out two tickets from her bag on the ground and showed them to Yosuke.

"The Escher exhibition ends today."

"Ohh"

He took the tickets in his hand.

"He's a famous painter known for his trompe l'oeil illustrations. Yosuke-san, are you interested?"

"It'll be good for your art studies, right? I'll go with you."

"Really!?!"

"Of course."

"I'm so happy!!!" Maki hugged Yosuke's arm.

"Well then..."

As soon as she raised her head to look at Yosuke's face, Maki Sonomura's vision was blocked by something completely white.

It was an empty room with blank white walls and no furniture.

"Yosuke-san!?"

The figure that had been with her just moments ago was nowhere to be seen.

"Where... am I?"

She found herself lying on a bed.

"What's happening!?"

Wasn't I in the art room just now!?

"...It was just a dream again."

She remembered.

And in an instant, loneliness engulfed her.

II

On the north side of Mikage-cho, there is a three-story general hospital.

The Mikage General Hospital.

A girl was being hospitalized here.

"It's all getting more and more real"

Her name is Maki Sonomura.

She was a high school student enrolled in St. Hermelin's class 2-4.

However, she hasn't worn that uniform for almost half a year now.

"It's as if I can't tell what is reality anymore."

She glanced around the sterile, lifeless white room with a resentful gaze.

"It's like every day, everything repeats itself"

The regular hospital routine starts from the morning temperature checks, lights are out by nine in the evening, and she spends most of her time alone in the hospital room.

Compared to that life, the dream she had just had felt much more real.

"I wish this was the dream instead..." She sighed.

Just as spring began, she was hospitalized shortly after entering her second year.

And for half a year, she's been here in Room 302.

"I thought I could finally go to school like a normal high schooler..."

Sickly from an early age, Maki had spent most of her elementary and junior high school years in a hospital bed.

As a result, she had hardly participated in events like sports festivals, field trips, and even school trips.

With only occasional visits to school, she had no one she could call a close friend.

Outside of school, she was a lonely person.

So, she pinned her hopes on a new life.

In high school, she wanted to live a normal life. She wanted to be strong and enjoy school life like everyone else.

With that determination, she devoted herself to her treatment.

And then, she finally entered St. Hermelin High School.

This private high school, known for its open-minded school culture, was popular among various types of students due to its numerous achievements in club activities, which were more significant than academics.

Another reason she applied to this school was that they allowed her to earn credits through exams and reports even during long periods of medical leave.

She felt that this school was her last chance to change her life.

That's why Maki's joy at the entrance ceremony was greater than the other students could've imagined.

After nine years of patience since elementary school, she could finally have the school life she had dreamed of while lying in a hospital bed.

No, rather, she thought her wish had finally come true.

Thanks to such strong determination, Maki had been able to lead a normal school life since she entered school, except for two visits to the hospital twice a week.

The regular examinations she underwent only confirmed that her condition was improving.

Whether it was because she focused on building physical strength as instructed by the doctors or because her resistance to illness had grown alongside her body's development, she couldn't tell.

Upon enrollment, she joined the art club.

For Maki, who had spent a lot of time alone in a hospital bed, interacting with people was difficult. But here, she made friends through art. One of them was Chisato Kasai.

And she also met the man she admired for the first time.

"I wonder how he's doing right now," Maki thought of him.

Yosuke Naito, known as the *nice guy* of the school and the most popular young man among the girls.

"In my dreams, we're together every day..." Maki murmured.

Since enrolling, Naito had been a hidden figure in Maki's heart.

Of course, the shy Maki couldn't ever express her feelings like that.

All she could do was casually walk where he might be.

Even that simple act required immense courage for her, as if her heart would burst.

"But, I really wonder if it was all a dream..."

Every day, she dreams.

They are always dreams about school.

Her dreams were detailed and realistic recreations of her school life up until the time she was hospitalized.

"Maybe Yosuke-san and I were really dating...."

Yosuke's figure came to Maki's mind.

Yosuke, who was with her...

Sometimes they held hands and went on dates. They were envied as the ideal couple on field trips and at school festivals.

It was hard to believe that any of this was just a dream.

Certainly, Maki had a one-sided crush on Yosuke. She remembered that.

But... her memories after that were vague. She didn't remember what happened to her afterward.

Perhaps being hospitalized for six months has messed up my memories, Maki thought.

She remembered Yosuke speaking to her amidst her crush, bumping into him on the street, being with him in the art room, receiving a call from him at home, being confessed to by him, and making handmade lunches early in the morning for their dates.

Maki was no longer sure about what was a dream and what was reality.

"I wonder how much is a dream and how much is reality..."

She remembers Yosuke visiting her in the hospital room she was currently in with a bouquet almost every week. Even now, when no one else visits her room, Yosuke always came every week to tell her about the events at school.

(If I recall, last week, he told me about the soccer match. Yes, they won in overtime with Yosuke's free kick...)

*I remember the details. No doubt about it.
But, was it really like that?
Or was it just a memory from a dream?*

She doubted her own memory. Something about this memory felt different.

"To think I can't distinguish between dreams and reality anymore..."

Surely her mind must be foggy from the medication she's given daily for her treatment daily.

But, if it really were true....

Her cheeks flushed red for a moment.

But soon after, she shook her head.

(I knew it. It was a dream, just a dream...)

Her reality was just this small world, a rectangular box, enclosed by these white walls.

And then, at that moment, there was a knock on her hospital room door.

There was a silhouette outside the door. However, it was too early for the nurse's checkup.

The door opened, revealing the shadow of a man holding a bouquet of flowers.

Could it be...?

(Yosuke-san!?)

It wasn't a dream...!?

Yes, it wasn't a dream.

III

A man wearing a yellow hat held up a bouquet of flowers and smiled at her.

"...Inaba-kun"

"How are you feeling?"

Seeing him, Maki regained all her memories.

Yosuke Naito had never come to the hospital, and they had never spoken.

It was all just memories from her dreams.

Every week, the one who encouraged her with a bouquet was this man, Masao Inaba.

"You sound a bit down."

"It's nothing."

"Are you sure...?"

"Yeah, maybe I was feeling a bit sick..."

"Hey, are you okay? I can leave if you want."

"No, it's okay. Just seeing your face cheered me up."

Suppressing her disappointment, Maki tried to smile at Inaba.

"Thank you, Inaba-kun"

"I-I'm glad"

Inaba gave an embarrassed smile.

"I've been coming here every week. I thought I was starting to annoy you..."

"What makes me happiest is when you come here" Maki smiled, "I've been waiting for you to come today."

Inaba's face turned red.

"R-Really? Sonomura..."

"Of course"

With a forced smile that she tried her hardest to muster, Maki nodded to Inaba, calmly observing him.

(I knew it... Inaba-kun, you...)

Maki was somehow aware of Inaba's behavior towards her. She knew that he had feelings for her. So, what she said to Inaba was just to go along with him. It was a lie to catch his attention.

But Inaba, completely unaware, became more comfortable with her and began to tell Maki about the events that had taken place at the school.

"As for the news this time..."

Inaba put his hand on his head and seemed to be thinking.

"Well, it's like always. Ayase is still saying nonsense as usual..."

"I see"

Come to think of it, during the early days of her hospitalization, various people came to visit her room one after another, encouraging her and saying they would do this or that once she recovered and left the hospital.

Maki thought she would be discharged soon. She believed that after just one month of hospitalization, she could return to school as usual.

Since entering high school, her illness had been relatively stable, and she didn't feel any abnormalities in her body.

However, even after a month passed, even after two months passed, she still couldn't leave the hospital.

On the contrary, the amount of medication she was forced to take every day increased.

When she was first admitted to the hospital, she was given two kinds of medications: tablets and capsules

But now, she was given different kinds of medication three times a day.

Moreover, after a week, the medication would change to something else.

And then, even the classmates who used to visit her room frequently gradually stopped coming.

Once she officially took a leave of absence, there was no one left to visit her.

Except for Inaba, who showed up once a week at certain times.

At this rate, I'll be completely forgotten.

And if that happens...

(Everything will just be the same as before...)

I absolutely don't want that to happen.

Even if it meant telling a lie to get Inaba's attention, she wanted something that connected her to the outside world.

And, I want everyone to remember me

If Inaba came and told someone in class about talking to her, everyone wouldn't forget about her. With that in mind, she was using Inaba's feelings.

No, it wasn't just that. Maki had another reason.

"...Well, when it comes to talking about class, it's kinda like that. Also, there was something regarding the drama club preparing for some kind of folk play... Um, what was the title again?"

Inaba pondered for a while.

"Nnh, I can't remember at all. Guess i'm pretty dumb"

"Hehe. That's not true. You remember so many things, you're amazing"

"R-Right"

Inaba scratched his head happily, a little embarrassed.

Although the stories Inaba told about school mainly revolved around the class, sometimes there were also discussions about school-wide events and club activities.

Maki's primary objective was to hear about Yosuke Naito from these conversations.

When she heard about Yosuke's performance in a soccer practice match held at school, she would imagine his gallant figure and feel her heart flutter. And after Inaba left, she would secretly draw an image of his success in her sketchbook.

Of course, Inaba was unaware of Maki's feelings.

So, whenever the topic of Yosuke came up, he would casually provide detailed explanations. Rather, he was delighted when she showed excitement about his stories.

What would Inaba think if he knew her feelings?

Even if he were to know Maki's true feelings, would he still come every week for her sake?

Or would he lose interest in her?

There was no way to know.

Inaba might still come regardless.

But even if he did, he probably wouldn't mention Naito like he does now.

To prevent that from happening, I must never let my feelings be known.

"Hmm...?"

Inaba's speech halted.

"Feels like I've seen this before"

He pointed to the table beside the window with an expression as if noticing it for the first time. In the center, there was something resembling a tower, symmetrically built on the left and right sides.

"Could it be...?"

"Yes." Maki nodded. "St. Hermelin High School..."

Inaba looked at it intently.

"It's very well made" Spoke an impressed Inaba, "Did you make this, Sonomura?"

"Just to kill time"

Unbeknownst to Inaba, the St. Hermelin made of blocks served as a stabilizer for Maki's mind.

Although she said it was just to kill time, Maki was afraid of forgetting about the school during her long hospital stay.

"The paintings on the wall are new too. Is this a new one?"

"Yeah. I don't have much to do other than keep drawing..."

"Hmmm"

Inaba gazed at the painting hanging on the wall behind the bed.

"As always, Sonomura's paintings are good."

He spoke with admiration.

"With this talent, you could be a great artist in the future"

"I wonder about that"

However, Maki didn't seem entirely pleased with the compliment.

Upon entering high school, Maki, who was shy and introverted, initially struggled to make friends. She didn't know how to communicate with others.

However, her anxiety was dispelled by her unexpected talent, which manifested through her paintings.

A painting she created in the art club won the gold prize in an art competition. She was then honored in front of the whole school, her photo appearing in the newspaper, making her the most famous student with artistic talent in the entire school.

Strangely enough, she began to receive attention as a talented classmate in art.

During art class, boys and girls alike would gather around her to see her work.

They would even ask her for advice.

Moreover, as she was skilled in art, she would be responsible for designing the class flags for sports festivals and posters for culture festivals.

"I actually took one of Sonomura's posters from last year's cultural festival and put it up in my room."

"Well, Inaba-kun..." Maki looked down in embarrassment.

(But I wonder what the schedule will be like this year...)

Maki was worried about the posters.

Just before the end of the culture festival, she had been approached by the student council to do it again next year.

"Well, it seems that...Kasai will draw it this time"

"Huh!?" Maki missed what Inaba was talking about.

"What is Chisato going to draw?"

Chisato Kasai.

She was Maki's best friend in the art club.

Despite her introversion, she was one of the first people to talk to her.

Although her personality was the complete opposite to Maki's, being full of positivity, she was the first to recognize Maki's talent in art and her number one supporter.

"It seems she's volunteering to replace you for the culture festival posters"

"I-I see..." Maki's voice trembled slightly.

"She said she'll make a piece better than the hospitalized Sonomura, and surprise everyone since she won't lose. So when it's finished, she'll probably come to show it to you, huh?"

"Chisato's going to draw it..."

Maki was intensely shaken by Inaba's casual remark.

"Hey, Sonomura... what's wrong? You look pale..."

"I-I'm... fine..."

"Hey, Sonomura..."

A piece better than mine?

(That's...)

But, I was supposed to draw it...

Even when while hospitalized, the student council president told me that! Why!?

Although she didn't tell anyone, Maki had been preparing the poster for this year's school festival for quite some time.

She had been putting effort into creating a piece that would surpass last year's.

For her, the time spent making this poster was the only time she could forget about her illness.

During the moments when she was drawing the poster, she didn't feel like she was in a hospital room but rather, back at school. In a way, it was because of this that she managed to endure her long hospital stay.

Even though she's in the hospital, she felt like she was participating in the most important event at school. And she was being entrusted with it as the face for the event.

Maki could keep ongoing with such pride.

But now, that pride has just been shattered.

(It's fine if it's not me....)

Of all people, Chisato is drawing it....

Everything in front of Maki turned pitch black.

It couldn't be like this... it can't be like this...

Does that mean the school doesn't need me anymore...?

No, that can't be.

It can't...

"H-Hey, Sonomura."

Inaba was startled to see Sonomura suddenly become like a puppet with broken strings.

(What is going on?!)

Sonomura, who had been smiling just a moment ago, suddenly turned silent.

"Sonomura!?"

"..."

"!?"

"It wasn't....like this...."

Maki was staring at something with vacant eyes.

Inaba followed her gaze and noticed that Maki's eyes were directed towards the school made of blocks.

"H-Hey. What's wrong, Sonomura?"

This was the first time he had seen Sonomura like this.

"Pull yourself together, Sonomura."

Inaba placed his hand on her shoulder.

And then, he clearly heard—

This. is not. my. reality.

IV

I hear crying.

Whose crying?

Mine? No, it's not me.

Then whose voice is it?

The man was looking at something.

In the pitch black space, only one thing was moving.

It was a girl in a black dress cowering in the distance....

A girl of about five years old with a black ribbon on her head was crying with her back turned towards him.

Why on earth, he wondered, was this little girl crying?

Was she being punished by her father? Or was she being bullied by someone?

However, he felt that something was different.

He felt like he had seen this scene somewhere before.

The girl seemed to be pleading for something as she cried, and he listened intently, trying to hear.

Amidst the sobs, he thought he heard her saying,

"Daddy... Daddy..."

(This is...)

He had a hunch.

This girl is lost and crying about something...

She's crying...because she's waiting for someone to show her the right path.

(How do I know that?)

He suddenly had a realization.

(It seems that I'm dreaming right now...)

Kandori realized that he was in the space between consciousness and unconsciousness.

(Dreams are said to be mirrors reflecting one's consciousness...)

He remembers reading such from a book before.

(If that's the case, what is this girl?)

I know that this is an illusion created by my unconscious.

So, what was this girl inside me?

The waking part of his mind pondered, trying to analyze.

(I don't know...)

(Why am I having such a dream...?)

"Boss, what's wrong?"

He could now hear Mayo's voice.

"A dream, huh..."

Kandori noticed Mayo standing in front of him, dressed in a nightgown and holding two glasses of brandy in each hand.

"It seemed like you were having a nightmare..."

"Yeah, seems like it."

Kandori took the glass from her hand.

This is Kandori's apartment. He sat slouched on the sofa in the living room, which was about twenty tatami mats in size.

"You've been quite busy lately, so you must be tired" She said as she sat down next to him and overlapped her glass with his.

Outside the large window in front of the sofa, the city seemed enveloped in darkness. The faint red glow of the sun seemed like the aftermath of something burning moments earlier.

"That might be it," he nodded.

"So, what kind of dream was it? Was it about the company?"

Kandori cocked his head left and right.

"No, it was just a trivial dream."

However, it was a strange dream.

"It didn't seem like a good dream at all," Mayo's face stared deep into Kandori's eyes.

"Your forehead was sweating so much..."

She gently wiped it away with her palm.

"You're too kind..."

"Oh, are you just realizing that now?"

"Yeah..."

"For me, the Boss is..."

Kandori stopped her words.

"What's wrong?"

"This is my private space. There's no need to call me Boss here."

"..Yes"

A shy color appeared on Mayo's beautiful face.

But those words simultaneously satisfied her pride.

"Then, I'll call you that from now on"

Kandori nodded silently.

"Also..." Mayo turned her moist eyes to Kandori. "An accountant has finally discovered the secret of the president's hidden bank account."

"Oh?"

Mayo was talking about SEBEC's president, Kanda.

"Interesting."

"Right now, we're secretly tracing the flow of this money"

"As always, your work is impressive."

"Eventually, it will probably lead to the executive director of Saeki Trading, Morikawa. If that happens..."

"That old man again. He's a money-grubber..."

"Anyway, this is our chance to bury them."

"That's right..." Kandori nodded.

(First, we must make those unsightly old men perish...)

V

"Were you invited too?"

"Well, a lady can't refuse an invitation..."

"Nevertheless, what's happening today...?"

Two men in navy suits, seated side by side at a large round table, whispered quietly to each other.

Around the table, about fifteen men and women in business suits were seated. They all seemed to be elites in their late twenties to early thirties.

"It seems like everyone here is a member of the group"

"Really?"

"Yeah, the guy right in front of us is in charge of general affairs in a steel company. I've seen him before. And the woman in the pink suit next to him, I think she is a secretary from a trading company..."

It appeared that only employees at the core of the Saeki Group, responsible for general affairs and accounting, were gathered here.

Moreover, everyone gathered seemed to be employees who had graduated from reputed universities with excellent grades, just like the two people present.

As they observed their surroundings, a woman in an orange suit entered the room.

"Oh, look who's here"

With a large file in hand, a beautiful woman in a miniskirt and high heels took a seat in the only empty chair, making her presence known as her heels clicked on the floor.

It was Mayo Miyashita.

"Well, it seems that everyone is here"

After scanning everyone's faces, she began to speak in a calm tone.

"I've gathered you all secretly at this hotel today for a specific reason."

All eyes turned to her.

"There's something I'd like to inform to you, those in charge of general affairs and accounting, about the crisis inside the Saeki Group."

"Crisis...?"

"What do you mean?"

Everyone was astonished by this unexpected statement.

"Does this mean there's a company that might go bankrupt among us?"

"No, each company within the group has been growing steadily on its own."

"Then what...!?"

"Parasites...the Saeki Group is being devoured by a few parasites"

At these words, silence broke out among the group members.

"It seems that you all know what I'm talking about"

With a scrutinizing gaze, Mayo glanced at everyone, but they all avoided her eyes and looked down.

The history of the Saeki Group is rather short.

After the war, the current chairman, Kozo Saeki, came back from Manchuria and built the company single-handedly.

Though he is now known as a man of ambition, he used to make a living by smuggling goods from the Yokohama and Yokosuka military bases and selling them on the black market in Shibuya and Shinjuku with his comrades.

With the money he earned, he started a small trading company.

This was the origin of the Saeki Corporation.

The Saeki Company experienced rapid growth due to the emergency demands of the Korean War. Leveraging the connections he had cultivated within the US military, he was entrusted with procuring military supplies.

The large orders from the military brought immense profits to the Saeki Corporation, and Saeki's name quickly became prominent in the business world.

"While the media portrays the Saeki Group as a dominant force rivaling the Nanjo Konzern and dividing Japan in two, if the Nanjo Konzern is considered the true establishment representing Japan, Saeki Group is still nothing more than an upstart company."

Miyashita's words continued.

"The reason for that lies with the man who controls the Tokushin Association. You all know who I'm talking about, right?"

The Tokushin Association is a consultative body established by Kozo Saeki ten years ago to discuss the group's policies and strategies. It was created with the aim of modernizing the company and moving away from his autocratic management style.

Out of the hundreds of companies in the Saeki Group, the presidents of ten core companies are selected as members.

The members are Chairman Saeki; Fujii, the president of Saeki Corporation; the president and managing director of Saeki Telecommunications, Morikawa; president of Saeki Electric, Yoshinaga, and Iwasawa of Saeki Construction.

In addition to major companies in banking, securities, steel, and real estate, SEBEC's President Kanda had recently joined.

"You all know who I'm talking about. Morikawa Takao, the Executive Director of the Saeki Company"

Morikawa is known for being Saeki's right-hand man.

Legends has it that, having run a sewing and clothing factory, Morikawa was impressed by Kozo Saeki's immense sales power and brought all the employees of his factory to the Saeki Company.

Thanks to this factory, the Saeki Company was transformed during the Korean War from being a broker that distributed goods left and right to a manufacturer that made shirts and socks ordered by the U.S. military in its own factory, and with this, it's said that the company made enormous profits.

In other words, without Morikawa, Saeki's growth wouldn't have been possible.

Mayo unequivocally called Morikawa a parasite.

"Under the facade of loyalty to Chairman Saeki, he sent only his closest associates to the Tokushin Association, which is supposed to fairly discuss the Group's personnel affairs and business plans. In addition, when it came to human resources at each of the Group's companies, he only gives positions to those he favors.

This is how he controls you"

It was exactly as Mayo had said.

They had all joined the Saeki Group, which was said to represent Japan, with the intention of demonstrating their skills to the fullest, but within a few years, everyone's dreams had been shattered.

This was due to the harsh reality that job performance did not necessarily determine promotions. No matter how much profit one made or how successful something was, it mattered less than being close to a specific group.

Moreover, it was said that only those with exceptional abilities among superiors and seniors were demoted, while individuals favored by a certain group took their place.

The power of the group was so strong that everyone had given up.

As a result, after a few years of joining the company, there were three types of situations.

Those with abilities either moved to rival companies with their clients and research, while those without either passively worked at the company with a sense of resignation or actively sought advancement by contacting the group.

The major companies of the Saeki Group were enveloped in such a sense of lethargy.

"However..."

"Hey"

Similar reactions occurred at each seat.

Those gathered here were no different from those who were spending their days in resignation.

"I have evidence that some of the members of this Tokushin Association are conspiring behind the chairman's back to privatize the group."

"Is that true?"

"This file contains records of transactions to a fictitious company's bank account, conducted by SEBEC's President Kanda who used it for material transactions under the guise of introducing various group companies such as information, telecommunication and steel."

Everyone surrounding Mayo exclaimed in surprise.

"This fictitious account is undoubtedly for Morikawa and others to create slush funds"

It was a significant discovery.

"What do you think? Even this alone can deal them a blow."

"B-but... Who could possibly..."

Mayo smiled at the man staring at her with a frightened look on his face.

"No need to worry."

Then, she turned towards the door and said,

"It's about time you came in, President Kandori"

"!?"

Everyone present was stunned at the name Mayo called out.

"...Let me be clear. Apart from the chairman, no one is thinking about the future of the group. All they think about is exploiting the group. Do you understand what this is bringing to the current Saeki Group?"

They were captivated by Kandori's words.

For these young employees, Kandori was the epitome of charisma.

After graduating from a prestigious foreign graduate school and working as Chairman Saeki's secretary, he steadily demonstrated his achievements in several group companies and was appointed as SEBEC's branch manager at the young age of 28.

There was no one else in the Saeki Group who had risen to such heights in just two years or so.

Furthermore, Kandori had a knack for assessing people's abilities and utilizing them effectively. He evaluated his subordinates based on merit and valued those with skills, which contributed to his popularity among the younger employees.

"Countless frauds and collusions are gradually corrupting the group. But for now, it's still manageable, as long as the weight of the chairman is hanging over them. However, what if Chairman Saeki dies in the near future? At that time, they will gain even more power. And then, the group will undoubtedly collapse, with the young being the most affected"

They were sensitive to the mention of Chairman Saeki's death.

If that really were to happen...

Their hearts could only fill with anxiety.

"President Kandori, what should we do?"

"Frankly speaking, I am worried about our future"

"Our most talented individuals are leaving one after another..."

Kandori could read what lay behind their pleas.

(They're like dogs after all...)

Only reacting when it's about their own food...

(Just mere dogs)

Kandori believes that there are two kinds of people.

Those who own and those who are owned.

Of course, most people were the latter. Even those who are capable and have many subordinates fall into this category.

And the people here were no different; they just wanted to be owned by someone.

They were all wandering around with their tongues hanging out in the fence called "company," looking for other owners who will give them more food or a master who will love them more than Morikawa, because Morikawa is not their owner.

That's all there is to it.

They weren't worried about the Saeki Group; they were only concerned about themselves.

(In the end, they're just a worthless bunch...)

But even dogs have their roles...

"As one of the young much like yourselves, I also am concerned about the current state of affairs"

Said Kandori, looking at each of them before speaking again.

The tension that had been building up in the room dissipated.

"Therefore, I've decided to thoroughly investigate all the corruption running rampant within the group and report it to Chairman Saeki, with the determination to eradicate this decay"

The unexpected proposal took everyone present by surprise.

"I would like to ask for your cooperation in this endeavor."

Kandori bowed politely to them.

"Of course, I intend to carry out this proposal under my personal responsibility, and I have no intention of involving any you"

Kandori promised them that he would denounce the current management on behalf of the younger generation.

CHAPTER III

THE DEVA SYSTEM'S OPERATION PLAN

"Mr. Kandori, the experiment is going very smoothly"

Dr. Nikolai was in high spirits.

"That's good to hear."

The two conversed in English as they watched the Deva system displayed on the large LCD screen.

In front of the gigantic gate of the Deva system, several rabbits equipped with several kinds of sensors were being held by researchers.

"According to his report, it seems that things aren't going as planned..."

"His?"

Dr. Nikolai's expression turned sour.

By "*his*", he was referring to Yamanaka, the institute's director who was standing behind Kandori and Nikolai.

Since Yamanaka couldn't speak English, he was unaware that the two were discussing him and was simply trying to gauge Kandori's mood with a friendly smile.

"He doesn't understand the significance of my research, all he cares about is the budget."

“My apologies. He's just an ordinary man, so he probably can't grasp the meaning of this research.”

It was Kandori himself who had chosen Yamanaka as the director of the research institute. But he did not show any concern about that.

"I'll make sure to give him a stern warning later."

“Hmm.”

However, those words didn't improve Nikolai's mood. His expression remained grim.

Then he said to Kandori,

"The current task is to eliminate spatial noise."

“Noise?”

“Yes.” Nikolai nodded. "We're bending and connecting each space and then connecting our gate, created within our space to it to enable teleportation.

However, it seems that noise is occurring in that space."

The noise Nikolai explained was a kind of energy wave.

"But don't worry. We've identified the cause of 99% of the noise. They're all simply physical waves. The noise pattern analysis has already been completed. It can be prevented by shifting the energy wavelength emitted from the Deva system."

“Doctor, the guinea pigs sensor check is complete”

“Energy supply to the power unit has reached system operation capacity.”

"Please specify the coordinate area."

Researchers turned to face the computer display one by one, bringing reports to the doctor and seeking instructions.

"Coordinate area, X-16.22, Y-22, B42."

When the doctor answered, a green wireframe graphic of the Earth was projected onto the giant LCD screen.

The glowing red dots apparently indicate the location of the lab.

“Understood. Transfer coordinates X16, Y22, Z42, set”

The sound of tapping on the keyboard echoed.

At the same time, the wireframe sphere began to move. Another red dot appeared. This seemed to be the transfer coordinates specified by the doctor.

“Transfer calculation started.”

Kandori watched the screen intently.

The wireframe sphere warped. The part with the red dot was indented inside the sphere. Then it stretched to another red dot and made contact. The part that made contact was projected separately with an enlarged graphic.

The red dots were not overlapping. There was something like a pipe between each of the dots.

“That part with the pipe is the gate part of the Deva system.”

Yes, it’s referred to as the conical device.

“The guinea pigs will be sent through this pipe to the streets of London.”

A long bar graph appeared on the screen, gradually filling with gray from left to right. Below the graph, it displayed a message in English stating that the transfer progress was being calculated, and the countdown to the scheduled completion time began. The number written as "2 minutes 30 seconds" was getting smaller and smaller.

While staring at the numbers, Nikolai's mood finally improved.

"However, I don't understand. I heard that Japanese companies would never invest in this kind of research, so why do you pour such a large amount of money into something so uncertain?"

"If the Doctor's theory is proven, the Saeki Group will dominate logistics worldwide."

Kandori replied with a nonchalant expression.

"But I doubt that such an investment will pay off..."

"Of course, this is true on a global scale. However, if you think about it on a cosmic level, it's a different story"

"I see. So you're applying the theory to space exploration"

"That's right. If you consider launching space rockets and building stations, it's more than profitable as a business."

"I understand that."

The doctor seemed convinced.

"If you're backing this research for such a grand purpose, there's no need to worry about pulling out halfway."

In the past, Nikolai has received funding from American and European companies and research institutes, only to have it cut short many times.

"Even though I've received the budget from your company, I can't help but feel uneasy...Especially with *his* attitude..."

Nikolai glanced briefly at Yamanaka behind him.

"When it comes to him, he's a mere commoner. Do not concern yourself with him. Everything is being done under my responsibility..."

(Yamanaka...you are a useful man)

II

"Your posters are all over town. Look, even there."

Yosuke pointed to the entrance of a convenience store near the school. A poster drawn by Maki was pasted on the glass window next to the automatic door.

"On the other side of the road too!"

Posters for St. Hermelin's school festival were plastered everywhere.

"It's kind of embarrassing."

Maki blushed as Yosuke continuously pointed out her drawings.

"Nothing to be embarrassed about"

"But..."

"Look, that girl over there has been staring at your poster for a while now"

A small girl in white clothes had been peering at the poster located on the opposite side of the street.

"You're right."

Maki had heard that this year's posters would be posted outside the school, but she didn't expect it to go this far. Thanks to that, she kept encountering them repeatedly during her date with Yosuke, blushing each time.

However, it didn't feel so bad. Especially when Yosuke seemed delighted each time he spotted one.

(I have to thank Chisato for this...)

She thought this was because Chisato had been looking out for her. Thanks to her, her artwork, which she had put more effort into this year than the last, was chosen as the poster.

"After the school festival, I guess it'll be time, huh?"

"Eh? Yosuke-san, do you have a match?"

"If I did, I'd say it more cheerfully"

Yosuke gave Maki a wry smile.

"Is something wrong?"

"You know, the counseling session before becoming a third-year."

"Oh, the career counseling?"

"Yeah."

Yosuke nodded vigorously.

"Well, it's nothing you could concern yourself with. With your ability, you'll definitely pass any art college."

"That's..."

She hadn't even thought about it.

When she became a third-year, the issue of career choices arose. Club activities like now would only last until spring, and from then on, it was customary to retire and prepare for exams.

"Maki, are you going to study at an art college?"

But she hadn't thought that far ahead. She simply thought that as long as she could draw every day, that would be enough.

"What about you, Yosuke-san?"

"Me? Maybe I'll probably just apply to a regular university..."

"I don't want to be a third-year..."

"What are you talking about? You can't do something like that."

"But..."

If she became a third-year, she wouldn't be able to live like this anymore.

In that case, Maki thought didn't want that to happen.

(Besides...)

Upon reaching the third year, she would be graduating the following year...

If that happened, she and Yosuke would be separated.

I can't imagine a life where we couldn't see each other every day like we do now.

(I want to stay like this...)

Stay in the second year, stay like this...

"But if we change schools, we won't be able to see each other..."

Won't be able to see each other?

Maki was surprised at her own words.

I've never even talked to him before, what am I saying?

Yes, Naito-san probably doesn't even know me.

And yet, why does he seem so close to me?

(A dream!)

This is another dream...

(I don't want a dream! I want to attend the real school!)

"I'll make it for you."

In front of Maki, a girl in white clothes appeared out of nowhere.

"I'll make a real school for you."

"Um, who are you...?"

(How does she know what I'm thinking? Ah, that's right, because it's a dream...)

The little girl in white opened a compact she had taken from somewhere.

"First, I'll bring you the real him"

"Huh!?"

The compact shone.

It was some time later that Yosuke Naito went missing....

"Strange. Shouldn't we have succeeded in joining the spaces...?"

Dr. Nikolai stared at the LCD screen with an expression of disbelief. If the experiment was progressing smoothly, images of London, the capital of England, should have been sent via satellite.

However, the screen was in a state of zap-like static, showing no images.

"We need to hurry and locate the guinea pigs"

"Doctor, what happened?" Asked Kandori towards Nikolai.

"The calculations were perfect..."

Nikolai shook his head.

"We've caught the radio waves from the guinea pigs. I'll project it onto the LCD screen."

Soon, an image appeared on the screen.

"This is...!?"

Nikolai was surprised at the image.

"Please provide the location."

An operator brought up another window on the screen. In that window, a wireframe of the Earth was projected.

"It's at point X02, Y51, Z01!"

"Is that the location...?"

Kandori watched the video.

The grass and trees that spread all around were in a typical tropical shape.

"Yes. The Amazon rainforest. That's where the guinea pigs are."

Nikolai stared at the screen with a complex expression.

"We failed to control it."

Nikolai said with a disappointed look.

"We'll need to investigate the cause from now on."

"However, for SEBEC, this is a great success. It's now clear that the doctor's research has potential." Kandori spoke with praise.

(With this, my purpose will be fulfilled...

Compared to that, anything else to do from now on will just be killing time until then...)

Amidst the control room's applause for the doctor, only Kandori's eyes showed a sinister gleam.

III

"Even you've thought it through."

Kandori looked at a file while facing the desk in the manager's office.

"However, I must say, I'm impressed by your shrewdness. Not only did you put together a new faction to destroy the executive director's faction, but you also managed to gather this much evidence..."

The file contained records of Morikawa's faction's hidden accounts and all their fictitious transactions.

Their method was extremely clever; Instead of dealing directly with subcontractors and material suppliers, each company traded through several companies with only names on paper, allowing them to stockpile the profits.

Among the Group's affiliated companies, over a dozen companies under Morikawa's influence were accumulating hundreds of millions of yen using similar methods. With this much evidence, Morikawa would surely be ousted for embezzlement.

"This is a major scandal."

If the presidents of the companies mentioned here were involved, half of the key members of the group would be disgraced. The company's image would be tarnished.

"It's all thanks to the efforts of the members of the Takazume Association."

"I see..."

Kandori didn't care for such matters.

For now, thanks to Mayo, his goals seemed to be progressing more smoothly than he had anticipated. With this much material for negotiation, most demands would be met.

"Where's the crucial data?"

"In this floppy disk..."

Mayo handed Kandori floppy disk in a case.

"We must reward their efforts in gathering this evidence."

"I'll convey the Branch Manager's words to them."

Marunouchi, in the heart of Tokyo, was the headquarters of the Saeki Group.

And Saeki Corporation, the group's top company, towered over Tokyo Station with its thirteen floors of modern architecture.

A meeting with the Tokushin Association, the group's highest consultative body, was taking place in the exclusive boardroom on the thirteenth floor of the Saeki Corporation.

At the conference table, spread out in an "L" shape, were about ten representatives from each company, and in front of each table was a laptop computer with an LCD display constantly showing data on the matters to be discussed.

However, there was an uneasy atmosphere among them.

"I can't believe it. Why does SEBEC, and only Mikage-cho's branch, need to concentrate the group's top researchers?"

Yoshinaga Hiroshi, president of Saeki Electric, was showing his displeasure.

Displayed on the screen was the group's new personnel plan.

"What does SEBEC intend to do? Are they planning to crush our research division? There's no obligation to let SEBEC take away the talents we nurtured just because it's part of the group."

Yoshinaga glared at SEBEC's President, Kanda Yasuo.

"I can't approve of such reckless personnel changes!"

"And I can't understand concentrating human resources only in the Mikage branch either"

Iwasawa Norimasa, president of Saeki Construction, spoke with exasperation.

"I'm sure you're aware how much research funds are spent on Dr. Nikolai alone, don't you? How much do you think SEBEC is contributing to the group's revenue? Stop talking nonsense."

"President Kanda, what were you thinking when you brought forth this proposal? If you're also from a technical background, don't you understand the value of excellent technicians?"

President Kawamori of Saeki Heavy Industries was berating President Kanda of SEBEC, who was sitting directly in front of him.

Kanda, however, said nothing back.

"President Kanda, are you even listening!"

"Not worth discussing."

Despite Kawamori's growing frustration with Kanda's attitude, he remained silent, looking as if he had lost his soul, with his eyes just staring blankly.

"Is Kanda-kun serious?"

A murmuring spread throughout the conference room.

Each company within the group had operated independently until now. It was unsettling to propose breaking that tradition, and the attitude was unsettling.

"Executive Director Morikawa, what are your thoughts?"

Yoshinaga sent a pleading look to Morikawa.

"Indeed, while SEBEC's strengthening of research and development is necessary for the group's support..."

The obese old man that was speaking with hesitation to Chairman Saeki, who was sitting next to him, was Takao Morikawa, president of Saeki Telecommunications as well as the executive director of Saeki Trading.

"I think this proposal is appropriate as a stimulus for the current stagnant Saeki Group."

As Morikawa spoke and nodded, several others followed suit.

"How about hearing the details directly from Kandori-kun, who proposed this, Chairman?"

"I'll leave it to you."

"Then, Kandori-kun. Permission granted, please proceed."

As Morikawa spoke, the door opened for Kandori to enter.

Seeing this, Yoshinaga and Kawamori were surprised.

(Was this a set-up?!?)

The progress of the meeting, seemingly having secured the consent of the majority of members, alongside Kandori's appearance, was all too good to be true.

However, Kandori stood between Chairman Saeki and Executive Director Morikawa with a blank expression on his face.

"I would like to tell you about our plan to strengthen SEBEC"

It was about the experimental results of the Deva System and the business areas within the Saeki Group where it could be applied in the future.

Everyone thought the research itself was groundbreaking, and if it were commercialized, it would undoubtedly bring immense profits to the group in the future.

However, Yoshinaga's suspicions deepened with this discussion.

(Strange. Why is Morikawa showing such favor towards Kandori...? And Kanda looks odd. Is something going on?)

Iwasawa also noticed the strange atmosphere in the room.

*(Why did Morikawa have Kandori attend the Tokushin Association?
Perhaps he's planning to replace Kanda with Kandori?)*

The Tokushin Association was strictly a meeting of the heads of Saeki Group's various companies. Even if the president couldn't attend due to some circumstances, no substitutes were allowed.

They had never invited such a witness before, so why was Kandori invited this time?

This troubled not only those who distanced themselves from Morikawa's faction but also members of Saeki Bank, Saeki Steel, and Saeki Securities, who belonged to said faction.

(Kandori, when did you manage to get into Morikawa's good graces...?)

Their eyes on Kandori were filled with such thoughts.

(Ha, you philistines...)

Kandori, showing an attitude of indifference to their feelings, continued his explanation while scanning the faces of the attendees.

"...From this situation, it is clear that quickly implementing Dr. Nikolai's research at SEBEC's Mikage branch could be the key to the future of the Saeki Group. Therefore, I would like to request urgent reinforcement of personnel as outlined in the attached document."

Kandori's explanation came to an end.

"Now, if I may, Chairman"

Morikawa looked at Chairman Saeki.

Seeing Saeki nod lightly, Morikawa continued with the proceedings.

"Now, let us raise our hands for the adoption of this matter.

With various considerations in mind, the attendees came to their own conclusions. Seeing their raised hands, Kandori smirked.

SEBEC's proposal was approved with eight in favor and three against.

The Tokushin Association prioritized the construction of the Deva System as the group's top priority and granted full authority over the project to Kandori Takahisa, a mere branch manager.

Only Saeki and Kandori remained in the conference room. The scenery outside the window was tinged with a slightly reddish hue.

Saeki Kozo remained deeply seated in his chair, gazing at the view. And Kandori, standing behind him, just stared outside.

"What sort of deal did you make with Morikawa, Takahisa..." Saeki sighed.

"N-Nothing really..."

"I can pretty much guess."

Saeki fixed a sharp gaze on Kandori. Then, as he met Kandori's eyes, he shifted his gaze back outside the window.

"Well, alright then"

Right now, all this young man harbored in his heart was his own ambition.

(But that's alright...)

That's what youth was all about. I had once been like that. Saeki thought.

"Takahisa, what are you going to do from now on?"

"Huh?"

"What are you going to do about Morikawa?"

"N-Nothing..."

To Kandori's surprise, Saeki's unexpected words left him stunned.

(Did he figure everything out!?)

No, that couldn't be.

"You seem surprised."

Saeki chuckled at Kandori's expression reflected on the window glass.

"N-No"

"Heheheh. Well, never mind. If a man can be defeated by such trivial matters, he wasn't much of a man to begin with..."

There was something inexplicable in that laughter.

"As you get older, you tend to become defensive in many ways. That's a bad thing. People who are on the defensive are not good. Depending on Morikawa's moves, I'll have to think about various things..."

Saeki's eyes gleamed sharply.

"Takahisa."

"Yes?" Kandori looked at Saeki.

"Everyone acknowledges your sharpness. I think so too. In terms of intellect alone, you've surpassed your father. Your father was also a smart man too..."

Saeki Kozo has been making a fortune in partnership with Kandori's father, who was a politician. Kandori's father leaked favorable information to Saeki and used his political prowess to appoint Saeki's company to government development projects, while Saeki, in return, took care of Kandori's political funds.

"But no matter how sharp you are, remember that there are limits to what a razor can cut. A razor can't cut an axe, but an axe can shatter a razor in one swing. And a razor can't even scratch an axe. Do you know what this means?"

Saeki continued in a gentle tone to the silent Kandori.

"Things solely conceived in the mind are fragile in the face of the strength of those who have lived through the battlefield of reality. You must become that axe...In that sense, your father was a strong axe..."

Kandori nodded silently.

"You, too, must become an axe..."

"Thank you" Kandori bowed his head.

"You can go. I'd like to stay here and think for a little while longer"

"Yes"

Kandori bowed respectfully to Saeki once again, then headed towards the door. As his hand reached for the doorknob, Saeki turned back to him.

"Takahisa."

With the door still open, Kandori turned his head towards Saeki.

"What is it, Chairman...?"

"About Morikawa..."

"Yes?"

"Don't delve too deep."

After that, Saeki turned his gaze back towards the window.

IV

(Don't delve too deep... huh...)

While on the drive back to the Mikage branch office, Kandori chuckled to himself.

(He even went so far as to use examples like razors and axes...)

The "axe" here obviously referred to Morikawa. Morikawa was a self-made man without even an academic background, even within the Saeki Group.

He was literally the number two in the group, having worked alongside Saeki on political manipulation and jobs related to the darker side of the group.

Because of this, Saeki couldn't easily cut ties with Morikawa. If Saeki were to turn against Morikawa, things he didn't want the public to know about would be exposed. Therefore, Saeki absolutely had to protect Morikawa and his faction.

(That's why...)

Kandori gloated.

(The key is to use your trump card effectively.)

Kandori remembered the floppy disk he had been given. Everything was done with anticipation of Saeki's reaction.

(A razor can't beat an axe, you say...?)

Kandori found it amusing.

(For someone like me, the Saeki Group holds no value now. However, at best I'll let them believe this is merely a power struggle within the Saeki Group)

For Kandori, both SEBEC and the Saeki Group were no longer of any importance.

(Once the system is completed, everything will be resolved...)

And it'll be soon...

Kandori glanced at his watch.

It was 3:15. If everything went smoothly, the new experiment should start right in 45 minutes, at 4:00.

If that were to succeed...

Kandori leaned back in his car seat, satisfied, and took a short rest.

"....."

In his fuzzy consciousness, he heard a voice.

Where was it coming from? It seemed to be coming from within his own consciousness.

More than a voice, it was more like a weak, feeble sound that was clinging to something.

Again...

I can hear it again...

"....."

The usual crying...

In front of Kandori, the black-clad girl was there.
She was crying with her hands covering her face.

I don't understand.

If this is something my unconscious created, why am I crying?

I have already won.

There's nothing for me to be afraid of anymore!

Kandori stared down at the girl.
Then, the crying stopped.

Suddenly, the girl looked up, wiping away her tears, and said,

"Papa, you've come..."

She hugged Kandori.

"Aki was lonely, Papa..."

It was a voice full of loneliness and sorrow, as if seeking protection.

"Is this a dream?!?!"

With the tremor of the car coming to a sudden stop, Kandori woke up.

Was it that girl's dream again?

But it was just a dream after all.

More importantly...

Kandori checked his watch. It was 4:00. The experiment should have started. He seemed to have made it in time.

Or so he thought.

When he looked up, the SEBEC Building wasn't there. However, he recognized the scenery of Mikage-cho.

"Hey, haven't we arrived?"

While trying to see the driver's face through the rearview mirror, Kandori was surprised.

The driver wasn't there.

"What's going on..."

There was no sign of the door having opened.

The driver's belongings were left in the passenger seat. Moreover, he couldn't have gone outside and leave Kandori alone.

Since, he woke up at the same time the car came to a halt.

What on earth had happened? Did the driver just disappear?

"No way..."

Kandori denied it, that couldn't be possible.

"Guess I have no choice."

He reached for the door on the left side of the rear seat. He would have to drive back himself.

But as he stepped out, he felt something strange.

"What the..."

There was nothing there. Normally, he should be able to see the police station to his left.

"Did I take the wrong road?"

No, it was the usual route.

"A garden..."

In front of him was a garden...

"That girl..."

Kandori saw her.

In the middle of the garden, a girl in a white ribbon and white clothes stood alone. The girl, about five years old, was looking at his car with a surprised look on her face.

"Just what the hell is going on..."

And that girl's face... I feel like I've had seen her somewhere. Where was it...?

"In a dream..."

His subconscious responded.

"It's the girl from the dream..."

But something was different. Something was off...

"Wasn't there a police station here?"

"Mai erased it and made it a flower garden"

"Erased it?!?"

He couldn't believe her answer.

What was this girl saying?

Kandori began doubting himself, wondering if this was also a continuation of the dream he had. However, as she looked at Kandori with wary eyes, the girl nodded.

"With this compact, the hospitals were also erased"

The girl held up the compact in her right hand.

"And you're not supposed to be here, old man!"

Her eyes were filled with hostility.

"This is... only for..."

*This girl wasn't the one I saw before.
That girl's eyes were filled with anxiety and loneliness.*

The girl in front of him slowly waved her right hand and opened the compact towards Kandori.

"I'll erase you"

She began to chant some sort of spell.

However, as if sensing something, her lips stopped moving.

"Looks like many people have entered Mai's paradise..."

"Paradise? Here?!"

Kandori was surprised by the girl's words.

What part of this place, which was almost identical to the usual Mikage-cho, could even be remotely considered paradise?

As Kandori stood dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events, people familiar to him began to appear.

"Branch Manager!? When did you get here!"

"Chief Asada?!"

Researchers, including Asada, Dr. Nikolai's assistant, were holding various equipment and looking at Kandori's face with various expressions, all of them looking surprised.

(This wasn't a dream after all...?)

Then, what in the world this place?!

"Erase us, you say!?"

"Everyone, we have to leave quickly. Otherwise, Mai will erase us all"

While thinking about what that meant, the girl's figure disappeared.

"Is this a dream... or is it reality..."

No matter how you look at it, it can only be thought of as a dream.

Asada spoke in an excited tone.

"Anyway, I was surprised to find how remarkably similar this space is to the one we are in"

Asada's explanation was as follows.

Once again, the teleportation experiment was unsuccessful in transferring the guinea pigs to the intended location. Moreover, surprisingly, the footage sent by the camera was that of a place with the exact same equipment as the Deva System Room.

However, there were no humans around. The guinea pigs only kept sending footage of an empty space with merely equipment left inside.

"We measured the coordinates where the guinea pigs were, but..."

The answer given was, "Unspecified, as they are outside the set area"

The area set for the Deva System corresponds to all geographical locations on Earth (including the bottom of the ocean, mountaintops and such) starting from this very laboratory.

What does that mean, that it went beyond such area?

"Does that mean this isn't Earth?" Kandori was puzzled.

"To be precise, it is Earth. But it is also a different universe that is not earth..."

Yes, that's what Asada said as a preface before starting to explain.

According to him, Dr. Nikolai had another hypothesis.

He believed that our space is expressed by three axes of coordinates, but besides that, there may be another coordinate axis.

That axis is the axis of time.

"Time?"

"According to the Doctor, this is a world on another time axis."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, I'm just repeating what Dr. Nikolai said, so I would like you to ask the Doctor for details..."

Asada scratched his head.

"Anyway, although there are some differences, there is no mistaking it that this is another Mikage-cho. I will report this to Dr. Nikolai based on the scientific data that has been collected"

"So, can we go back?"

"Yes. We can use the Deva System on this side, but..."

Asada looked puzzled.

"President, didn't you come here with through the Deva System?"

"No. I was just in a card ride"

"No way!?" Asada was in disbelief, "That's unheard of!"

Asada shook his head violently.

"According to our research, this town...the other Mikage-cho, is a space completely isolated from the outside world."

"An isolated space?"

"Yes. At the outskirts of Mikage-cho, there seems to be something like a barrier. It's impossible to come in here without the Deva System..."

"However, it is what happened..."

Kandori looked at Asada with a straightforward look.

"That car?"

Asada pointed to a car parked on the street.

"That's right."

"...I can't believe it. How could you get past the barrier?"

For all intents and purposes, it was an ordinary Mercedes Benz.

"Why am I here with you all when I haven't used the Deva System?"

"That's something we want to ask you, President. Is such a thing possible?"

"Anyway..."

If this is indeed another space, I must first return to the world where I came from.

(My purpose is one, no matter how vast the world is)

Among the excited Asada and the rest, only Kandori was thinking about something completely different.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVIL'S BANQUET BEGINS

"Exactly when will a move be made, I wonder..."

Mayo sat at her desk in the planning and coordination office, waiting for the phone to ring.

Until now, Mayo had been bustling around shortly after taking her seat at this large desk. Reason for this being that she wanted to get rid of the old-fashioned thinkers who controlled the Saeki Group and replace them with young, talented individuals like Kandori.

And now, she sat here waiting to put the finishing touches on her plan.

"Despite all the evidence..."

Mayo was anxious.

"It's been two months, why haven't the executives made any moves?"

Presenting such conclusive evidence to Chairman Saeki should have prompted some action. Even if they were to verify the evidence, it wouldn't have been surprising for some information to reach Mayo given that they had even reached out to Chairman Saeki's secretary.

However, there had still been no movement.

(What on earth are they doing?)

There was no indication of any secret contact between the Chairman and Executive Director Morikawa either.

Mayo had prepared several traps in case the executive faction attempted to erase the secret accounts. If they made a single move, members of the Takazume Association would immediately report so to Mayo and take action according to her instructions.

In the worst-case scenario, she was prepared to release all evidence to the media, without caring how this would tarnish the Saeki Group's image with the public.

First, getting rid of the old men was essential. Then, after that, Kandori would be praised as the savior of the Saeki Group externally and internally.

That was the scenario she envisioned.

However...

Nothing has happened.

"This is strange."

Clearly, something was amiss.

As she thought more about it, Mayo became increasingly uneasy.

Was something unexpected happening?

"Could it be... I failed!?"

For the first time, Mayo entertained the thought.

No, that couldn't be it.

I haven't made any mistakes. Everything should be perfect...

Regardless, Kandori told her to wait.

For now, she had no choice but to follow his instructions..

Trying to change her mood, she stood up from her desk.

At that moment, the phone rang.

II

"Huhuhuhu...."

A stifled voice leaked out—Kandori's voice.

Looking down and pressing his clasped hands against his forehead, Kandori leaned on the desk of the branch office.

His shoulders have been trembling since a while ago.

(Finally, the time has come...)

His voice was filled with laughter.

"If only you knew what the fully developed and fully funded Deva System would be used for..."

The face of Chairman Saeki flashed in Kandori's mind.

"Chairman, you'll finally see whether I'm a razor or not."

The final adjustments of the Deva System were soon to be completed.

The noise issue that was initially a concern has not been heard of since then. It was likely that the problem had been resolved with the help of technical teams sent from Saeki Electric and other telecommunications companies.

(Even though I initially thought of it as just a teleportation device...)

"Perhaps it was by chance..."

Kandori's mouth loosened at the unexpected discovery.

"What a marvelous find."

He was satisfied with the discovery, as if it had been laid out just for him.

And soon, he would achieve his goal using that power...

At that moment, the phone on his desk rang.

"Is it over?"

It came from the control room's direct line.

Once the final adjustments were completed, Dr. Nikolai was supposed to report to him. If everything was going smoothly, it was about time for the call.

With anticipation swelling in his chest, he picked up the phone.

But as he put the receiver to his ear, his expression clouded.

"What's going on?"

There was no sound coming from the phone.

"What in the world is happening?"

Was there a problem with the line?

Thinking so, he was about to redial when suddenly, a wall with a large drawn SEBEC symbol on it began to slowly slide out.

"!?"

(Doctor?)

Behind the wall was a room known only to Kandori and a few others.

Hidden in that room was an elevator that led directly to the underground research facility. Dr. Nikolai was allowed to enter the branch office using this elevator unconditionally.

It seemed that the doctor had come to report directly...

At least Kandori believed such when the wall began to slide.

But the person who appeared from behind the wall was not Dr. Nikolai.

"P...President..."

"You, you're... Numata!?"

Standing there was a researcher who served as Dr. Nikolai's assistant.

However, Kandori was speechless as he saw him.

His body was on fire!

Flames were rising from Numata's body.

But they weren't mere flames. The fire was burning only Numata's body without spreading to the surrounding area.

"P-Please help me..."

Numata staggered toward Kandori, still engulfed in flames.

"Ugh!"

Kandori involuntarily backed away.

"President!"

(What on earth just happened?)

He was without words.

"Du-during the experiment..."

The flames had already begun to engulf most of the man's body.

Charred to a crisp, the man nonetheless tried to convey something until the very end. But his entire body no longer held its shape. It collapsed, and the flames vanished.

"Th-This is...."

Kandori looked at it in disbelief.



He was no longer recognizable as a human. What remained was just charred remains.

"An accident...?"

(However...)

The underground laboratory had many layers of safety equipment installed in case of any kind of accident.

Does this mean they didn't work?

And not only that, there's a fire detector on the ceiling of this very same branch office.

(I can't believe that the fire detector didn't go off when a man was burning at such high temperatures)

"What occurred underground?"

(Is Dr. Nikolai safe, I wonder...)

"This is Taketa"

With that voice, Kandori snapped back to reality.

"I've come as indicated"

A man named Taketa entered the branch office with about ten subordinates.

The black suits and ties meant they were employees of the Saeki Security Service, commonly referred to as "The SS". They were known as a dark legion that ruled behind the scenes of the Saeki Group and were disliked by the employees. However, officially, their job was to manage the Saeki Group's facility.

They each held a black attache case.

"Take a look at this."

Kandori showed them Numata's body.

"What even is this?"

"I don't know. It seems there was an accident during the experiment."

"In this room?"

"The location is underground."

"But were there any labs underground?"

Taketa looked puzzled.

"You wouldn't know. It's a special facility known only to Chairman Saeki and a few others."

"I understand. If you mean that the details are top secret, then it is not our place to enter."

Taketa nodded.

"Do you have the blueprints?"

"I have them"

He pointed to what was spread out on the desk.

"I'll take a look."

"I see, it's a structure prepared for the diffusion of radioactive materials. So the direct elevator is here, right?"

Taketa and his team were examining the blueprints.

"All alarm systems failed to function at all."

Kandori said this to them as they looked at the blueprints.

"Even in this room."

"That's odd."

Takeda scratched his head.

"In that case, there's the possibility that the alarm systems were deliberately disabled."

"Deliberately?"

"We are more skilled in handling such accidents..."

"Are you suggesting terrorism?"

Taketa nodded casually.

"We're going to find out"

Taketa briefly instructed his subordinates.

"From now on, let's put on protective suits and head to the scene."

III

The elevator doors opened slowly.

Then, men completely clad in protective suits, reminiscent of spacesuits, made their entrance.

Heavy oxygen supply devices were attached to the backs of their metallic silver suits. Their heads were covered by large helmet-like devices, with only the face part covered with a magic mirror-like coating. Meaning, their faces could be seen from the inside, but not the outside.

They held guns in their hands, aiming beyond the door with an air of caution.

The passageway leading straight ahead curved to the left.

"Squad One, secure the corridor. Squad Two, hurry with the ABC reaction check. Squad Three, standby at the elevator"

This was the SEBEC's building underground research facility. A total of eleven people in protective suits followed the instructions and dispersed from the elevator to the corridors of the laboratory.

The first three to exit the elevator were in a gun-toting position across the aisle, scanning the surroundings with their eyes rapidly. Then, the next three held various detectors in their hands, working them in different directions. Finally, the remaining three formed a wall in the elevator to protect two of the later five.

Soon, their reports were heard.

"Squad One, no enemies spotted on the front!"

"Squad Two, No A reaction."

"No problem with B reaction."

"No abnormalities with C reaction."

Their conversations were transmitted through the diminute microphones and speakers inside the protective suits covering their heads.

"We thought we'd check just in case, but there really is no ABC reaction." The man in a slightly larger protective suit than the others said to the man next to him.

"So it's not some sort of biohazard..." Taketa replied.

A stood for Atomic reaction, B for Bio, and C for Chemical.

With this, it was clear that there had been no leakage of nuclear materials, bacteria, or poisonous gas from the laboratory.

"Alright. Let's move forward. Secure the nearby room."

Upon Taketa's words, the three men at the front approached the door.

"We'll unlock it."

One of them inserted his ID card into the card reader attached to the side of the door. The door opened easily.

"Go!"

As soon as the door opened, the three rushed in and aimed their guns in all directions.

"Chief, there is no enemy in sight"

"There are no traps to be found either"

Reports from the men rushing in could be heard through the speakers in their hazmat suits.

"Squad Two, Squad Three, advance to the location secured by Squad One"

Upon the report, the remaining men also started to advance.

Finally, two figures in protective suits, escorted by the third team, entered the room.

They stood by the entrance wall with their guns aimed, maintaining vigilance without letting their guard down.

"This room is..."

"In essence, it's just a warehouse."

It was an empty room. In the corner of the plain room with no equipment, only cardboard boxes cluttered the space.

"It should have only been used for assembling equipment that had been disassembled."

"I see." The stout man nodded.

"According to the blueprints, the sub-control room is on the other side of this room, correct?"

"That's right"

If they could get to the sub-control room, they would understand everything regarding the Laboratory's current situation.

"Anyway, let's hurry there. Squad One, to the door."

"Roger"

The three men moved forward.

But just a few steps from the door, their steps halted.

"Chief...!"

"What's wrong?"

"It's open!"

"What!?"

They found a gap in the door that they had thought was locked.

"Wait, it might be a trap, be careful."

It was unnatural for a door that was supposed to open and close automatically with an ID card to stop moving midway.

"Squad Two, get ready to support."

"Yes"

They changed from their detectors to hold their Ingrams and aimed beyond the door.

"We haven't found any apparent traps."

One of the three men examined the door and reported so.

"Alright, then open it."

With a dull sound, the door slowly began to move.

When it was about halfway open, a bloodied arm reached out from the other side of the door.

"!?"

Slowly, the man's body slowly collapsed in front of everyone.

It was a corpse.

"Chief, looks like there don't seem to be any external injuries as expected."

"I see." Taketa pondered for a moment.

"What on earth is going on?"

"There's no ABC reaction, right?"

"Yes." Taketa nodded at the response.

"Then, we will now switch to anti-terrorism equipment"

"Yes, sir"

At Taketa's words, they each began to remove their protective clothing.

"Squad One, move to search for potential threats in the passage to the control room"

"Got it"

With Takeda's instruction, the three men disappeared beyond the door.

"You, too, can take off the protective suit as well"

Said Taketa to the man next to him as he began to remove his own protective suit.

"Understood"

With those words, the man also removed his suffocating suit. And what emerged from it, was the figure of Takahisa Kandori, the branch manager of the SEBEC Mikage Branch.

"President, take this too"

He handed a weapon to Kandori. It was a machine gun.

"I'll show you how to use it."

Taketa demonstrated disarming the safety mechanisms.

"After that, just pull the trigger."

"Alright"

"However, even if there's no need for you to take such risks yourself..."

Kandori didn't answer and looked around.

"This doesn't seem to be man-made..."

Then, they entered the sub-control room. In the center of the room were a total of six desktop computers, each displaying data as usual. And in front of each terminal, researchers in lab coats could be spotted working.

Initially, Kandori and the rest were relieved to see that everything looked exactly the same as usual.

(So, it was just a minor accident after all)

When Kandori stepped inside the door, he felt relieved.

However, nothing was like it seemed.

Time had stopped here.

In other words, everyone in front of Kandori was dead.

When the SS personnel confirmed everyone's death, Kandori was dumbfounded.

Incredible as it may seem, the men in front of him were still doing their work as usual, but they looked as if their heart had stopped and their souls had been drained from them.

They still kept gripping the mouse and staring at the display, along with their mouths kept open, as if still giving out instructions.

Everyone remained frozen stiff, just like wax figures.

There was no pain and no fear in their expressions, they simply weren't alive.

(How is that possible...!?)

But the SS personnel, including Taketa, were not as surprised as Kandori.

"It's simple." Taketa replied to Kandori nonchalantly, "They were killed in the same way as the body we found at the warehouse door"

"The same way?"

"Yes, it's a common method used by terrorists with chemical knowledge. They used poison needles."

Taketa replied that the corpses' autopsy would reveal this immediately.

Certain types of poison could cause symptoms like cardiac arrest even in small doses once they enter a body. Something similar to the scene could be achieved by coating a small needle with such poison and stabbing a victim.

"By examining the blood, it won't be hard to tell what type of poison was used"

"What about the poison needle...?"

"They likely made an invisible needle out of the poison itself and inserted them somewhere"

"But how could they have been killed without them realizing it?"

"I can't say for sure without a more detailed investigation later"

Taketa nodded confidently.

"Probably, the person who collapsed at the warehouse door noticed this and tried to escape, but was then found and killed in the process"

"Then, how do you explain the burnt body?"

"We'll understand that after examining the other two rooms. More importantly..."

"What is it?"

"This eliminates the possibility of an accident.

Also, one more thing. Unfortunately, the perpetrator may be an insider. Moreover, judging from the efficiency of the attack, it's likely that there are multiple individuals involved"

Taketa's eyes turned to those of a hound that has found its prey.

"This is undoubtedly a crime aimed at seizing SEBEC's research data."

"Impossible..."

Only very few people knew about this research facility.

"In cases of simple acts of terrorism, flashy methods like bombings are used to attract external attention. But in this case, judging from the murder method, it's safe to assume that information theft was the goal"

Indeed, as Taketa said, while the researchers were dead, none of the equipment had been tampered with.

"In any case, regardless of whatever the data may have been, now that we've identified a threat to the Saeki Group, it's our job to eliminate them"

Kandori understood what Taketa's words meant.

Now that it's clear it wasn't an accident, the primary objective was to discover and eliminate the enemy. And in doing so, the SS will not take responsibility for any losses incurred in the process.

It's hard to believe, but that's the way the Saeki Security Service works.

This was also subtly written in the contracts of various Saeki Group companies. Therefore, even if a building were to explode or even if employees were to lose their lives, it would be the responsibility of the party that called the SS.

However, even if they were terrorists, there's no way a private security company would be allowed to commit murder. In which case, everything that happened would be recorded as an accident.

And then, cleanup would also be orchestrated by the Saeki Security Service if requested.

And so, a cover-up operation to attribute the accident to the deceased would be carried out. Methods that would not tarnish the company's image would always be chosen, and sometimes blame would be placed on innocent individuals.

But, few knew about this.

Though, when ordinary employees referred to the Saeki Security Service as "SS," there was always a dark implication. The uniforms, unified in black, bore a color reminiscent of the Nazi Party's Schutzstaffel (SS), which was created in the Nazi Germany era during WWII to maintain the party's prestige and suppress dissenters.

(I don't care how many people are killed. But...)

I can't afford to lose the Deva System and Dr. Nikolai.

No matter how many researchers die, they are easily replaceable any time. But the Deva System's creator, Dr Nikolai, must be preserved.

If he were to die as well, everything Kandori was about to do would come to nothing.

(That's my one true inconvenience...)

Anxiety crept into Kandori's mind.

His hope was almost within reach.

And time was running out. Sooner or later, someone would become aware of his plan.

"In any case, this is a project under the direct control of the Chairman. We can't think of it as a SEBEC standalone project"

"We understand that as well."

"That's good then" Kandori nodded. "You understand if Dr. Nikolai's life is lost, the SS will also have to take responsibility, yes?"

"But..."

(Of course, you are the SS after all...)

All they could think of was finding and killing the enemy.

"Taketa-kun..."

"Yes?"

"This is Chairman Saeki's word."

"Understood." Taketa nodded.

IV

The team traversed through intricately curved corridors towards the control room.

This design was meant to prepare for contingencies like fires or radiation leaks.

Yazawa, Shimada, and Sagawa, who were ordered by Taketa to scout ahead, walked with their nerves focused entirely on the path ahead. Their guns were always aimed forward, and beneath their anti-terrorism gear, they wore bulletproof vests.

They now reached the second turn point in the corridor, it veered to the right.

"*Status check*," the man in the middle spoke in a hushed tone.

He was Yazawa, the tallest among the three.

Shimada on the left and Sagawa on the right nodded.

Then, they listened intently to their surroundings, wary of any ambush.

"We must move out simultaneously" Yazawa ordered, and the other two nodded.

The three burst out, twisting their bodies to the right and aiming their guns straight ahead.

And then, they saw it.

A sea of blood...

"This, this is..."

On the floor, stained with red bodily fluids, was a torn arm and a corpse cut in half.

There were also spattered entrails.

The hallway was littered with parts of what had once been a human.

"What the hell..."

They were shocked by the gruesome method of murder.

As SS employees, they had killed people before and were accustomed to seeing corpses.

But even they felt a chill seeing the multiple bodies strewn before them.

"I don't think this was the work of a human..." Shimada's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Don't let your guard down" Yazawa cautioned the other two.

"We can't be sure there aren't enemies lurking. Sagawa, confirm the bodies"

"Understood."

Sagawa stepped into the sea of blood and began to inspect each of the sprawled bodies. He was checking for assailants disguised as corpses—a basic guerrilla tactic in any era.

"Are these really traps...?"

It would be hard to believe. None of the five bodies Sagawa checked were in a good condition in the slightest.

"Is there really such a way to kill someone like this?"

Sagawa was perplexed as he examined the bodies.

Professionals like them usually aimed for swift kills, like a bullet to the head with a gun or a stab directly to the heart with a knife.

But, this? The bodies here were torn apart as if by the sharp fangs and claws of a tiger or a leopard.

Intestines were scattered on the floor, and blood splattered not only on the floor but also on the ceiling and walls.

Moreover, one of the heads looked as if it had been gnawed by something on one half.

In this case, the brain marrow had mixed with the blood and dripped, turning that part of the floor a reddish brown.

And the other half, the head held an expression on its face that showcased shock at witnessing something out of this world.

"It's as if something ate him..."

It was a gruesome sight.

"Should we proceed, Yazawa-san?"

Although his face turned a little pale, Shimada asked for further instructions.

"Wait. I'll report to Chief Taketa"

Yazawa switched on the small microphone attached to his tie.

"C-Chief..."

Yazawa's voice was somewhat hoarse, speaking of his inner turmoil.

"It's Yazawa. Bodies were found at the corner just before the control room"

Taketa's voice came through the earphone in Yazawa's right ear, and Yazawa responded.

"Yes, I'll report the situation in detail"

Despite feeling queasy and about to gag, Yazawa reported the scene as it was.

(I don't know what's happening anymore...)

While Yazawa reported to Taketa, Shimada and Sagawa remained vigilant. Their sharp eyes scanned forward, with their guns aimed in the same direction.

"Yes, there are estimated to be five bodies, all presumed to be researchers."

At his feet lay a severed head, its eyes wide open as if screaming in agony.

"The weapons seem to be sharp blades, but that's not all."

If I were to describe it correctly, should I tell him that they were bitten to death?

Yazawa thought this as he made his report.

"Yes, that's correct. Yes."

Yazawa wondered if his report conveyed the gravity of the situation to Taketa.

"And then..."

As Yazawa tried to continue, gunfire erupted.

"Ugh, agh, uwaagh!"

Shimada next to him suddenly began firing wildly, as if mad.

"What's wrong, Shimada..."

His words stopped right there. Yazawa's eyes widened too.

"W-What are these..."

No words came after that.

Before he knew it, he too was screaming and firing bullets relentlessly at the slowly advancing figures before him.

"Yazawa, respond!" Taketa was calling Yazawa through the mic. "What's happening?"

The only sound coming out of the earphones was the sound of heavy gunfire.

"Yazawa!"

Amidst the incessant gunfire, there were barely audible grunts and cries as well.

(What's going on over there?)

It was evident that they had encountered an enemy given the situation.

But what were his last words?

There was a tone in his words that didn't suit the calm usually Yazawa.

(Those three were among the most outstanding young members of SS. What could have happened to them?)

They treat killing others as a business, and have calmly defeated their targets under any circumstances.

(It should be fine)

If they were in danger, they would ask Taketa for instructions.

However, he felt a sense of foreboding.

The sound of gunfire he heard...

Its intensity made it seem like they were shooting indiscriminately, blindly.

"What's wrong?" Kandori's voice brought Taketa back to his senses.

Though the gunshots still rang in his ears.

"The first scouting squad has encountered an enemy" Taketa reported to Kandori

"What?"

"They're currently engaged in combat"

"Are they alright?"

"Their abilities are solid" Taketa nodded.

However, the number of gunshots he could hear was diminishing.

"Ahh, ahh, oahh..."

Shimada continued pulling the trigger towards the approaching voice in front of him.

(What the hell are these guys...)

The thing in front of him blew up.

"How many have I taken down?"

He must have pulled the trigger countless times, yet they kept appearing one after the other. It felt like an endless cycle.

But I have to keep shooting.

That was the only thing he could do to save himself from fear

Otherwise, I would end up like Sagawa...

Just moments ago, Sagawa had been firing his gun near him. Now, he was completely defenseless, deprived of both his hands, no longer able to resist...

Even remembering it was horrifying.

Sagawa's arms had been torn off by the swarming creatures.

And then, writhing in agony amidst a pool of blood, he was...

(Eaten)

He was eaten alive.

The image of Sagawa's face at that moment burned into his eyes. Sagawa's eyes seemed to beg Shimada to kill him before he was consumed.

Perhaps. Perhaps that was the right thing. But he couldn't do it.

Rather than let Sagawa die as a human being, he wanted to keep himself alive.

It was all he could do to protect himself.

"Damn it!" Shimada continued pulling the trigger.

Click, click, click...

"The bullets..."

Had run out.

"Shit!" Shimada discarded the pistol.

He reached for the knife strapped to his belt. But before he could draw it, something bit onto his throat.

"This can't be happening..."

The events unfolding before his eyes were beyond Yazawa's comprehension. First Sagawa, now Shimada...

"They're being eaten..."

They were pulling out Shimada's intestines from his body, devouring them voraciously. It seemed all the corpses that had perished here had been eaten to death.

"I'm next..."

Yazawa's body trembled in fear. It was his turn to be eaten alive. He steeled himself. There were already few bullets left.

(Seems I've been lacking in composure...)

Yazawa recalled the voice he had been hearing in his ears since earlier.

"Yazawa, Yazawa, what's happening..."

It was Taketa's voice.

"C-Chief Taketa..."

Yazawa's voice finally reached Taketa's ears.

"What happened, Yazawa?"

"Sagawa and Shimada... they've been taken out!"

Taketa was surprised.

"Why didn't you call for backup?....N-no, wait!"

"If it's come to this..."

After cutting off communication, Yazawa's eyes were on the creatures. In his hand was a small switch. Several wires connected to the attache case he had been carrying with his left hand since earlier.

"...There's no other choice"

The attache case contained plastic explosives, intended for blowing open locks. And now, he intended to use it.

"I'll settle this in one go"

He was waiting for the right moment.

When they finished devouring Shimada and came towards him, he planned to attract them all and detonate the case.

But using it in this enclosed environment was dangerous. The nearly one-meter-thick lead walls would withstand the explosion, but he himself might get caught in it.

For this reason, he retreated to the turn in the hallway. The moment they attacked him, he planned to hide on the other side of the passage and press the switch.

"Come. I'll kill you all..."

Yazawa, right until the very end, waited for the precise chance to strike.

Everyone else continued to advance. Taketa stood at the forefront, with six subordinates behind him, holding their guns protectively around Kandori.

(Nevertheless, I hadn't expected them to be struggling...)

Despite being SS, Kandori thought they weren't much.

(I thought they'd be a little more useful.)

Since descending underground, he had been silently observing the rumored performance of the SS. However, their abilities seemed not as impressive as he had hoped.

(Chief Taketa is all brawn and no brains. The others are no better...)

Indeed, he thought those lacking in intelligence were useless.

(Can we really regain the Deva System intact with these people?)

Kandori, who had to rely on such individuals, felt a complex internal turmoil.

(However, since there are no other pawns, I guess I have no choice but to comply in silence...)

Despite Kandori's thoughts, they were searching for the bodies of their comrades.

There had been a massive explosion just moments ago in the place Yazawa referred to as a sea of blood.

It was Yazawa's bold move to lure the enemy and annihilate them all at once through an explosion. But they didn't understand why Yazawa went to such lengths.

If they were inferior to the enemy in terms of strength, they should have retreated, regrouped, and then plan an attack again.

But why didn't they do that? That was the big question.

"It's likely that Yazawa was blown away along with them" one of the SS remarked.

"Seems so" Taketa nodded in disappointment

"What in the world happened? And how did a man like Yazawa make such a big mistake?" Taketa was puzzled.

"It seems everything has been blown away in the explosion."

"I see"

What did Yazawa and the others fight against? They didn't know.

CHAPTER V

THE GATES OF HELL CREATED BY MAN

Covered by thick lead walls extending over multiple layers, even if the surface were to endure a nuclear attack, the underground research facility would be immune to the fear of radiation.

The inner walls of the facility, including the control room situated twenty meters underground, were shielded by one-meter-thick lead walls capable of withstanding direct missile impacts. Even in the event of an accident within the laboratory, it could withstand temperatures up to 3,500 degrees.

However, all those present here, save for one, were facing the fear of death.

(What the hell is this guy thinking...?)

Yamanaka couldn't fathom Nikolai's nerve, being so engrossed in watching the screen amidst such circumstances.

The old man in front of him was muttering something under his breath rapidly with an excited expression.

In his hands were notes, jotting down equations whenever inspiration struck.

Nikolai has been doing this ever since the accident.

"My subordinates... have been devoured..."

Yamanaka was overwhelmed by the gruesome scene displayed on the LCD screen.

When the accident occurred, everyone in this room, including him, witnessed the researchers on the screen dying one after another.

It was a horrifying sight indeed.

From the gate of Deva System emerged grotesque entities never seen before, immediately attacking the five, including Asada and Numata, who were controlling the system.

What followed seemed beyond the realm of reality.

Despite being an atheist, Yamanaka couldn't help but think that if hell truly existed, this was it.

Being devoured alive, or consumed by flames that seemed inexplicably alive—these were scenes he never wished to see again.

(Does this old man feel nothing when observing this?)

Could it be...

That this accident was just another step for Nikolai to complete his research?

Regardless of what happens, this was all merely an accident to further his goals?

Yamanaka felt a stark difference between himself and Nikolai.

(This isn't a joke. What kind of research is this in such a dire situation!)

He desperately wanted to escape from this place as soon as possible.

"Call the branch manager again!"

Yamanaka called out to the female operator seated at the desk with a display.

"But..."

She shook her head.

"Just make the call!"

"Understood."

With a desperate look on her face, she picked up the receiver again.

"Why can't we get through on the phone..."

Since the accident, no matter how many times they tried to contact the surface, the phone lines remained dead.

"We won't be able to report what's happening here at this rate."

"Director, what should we do?"

The researchers looked at Yamanaka with pleading eyes.

"Our regular contact with the branch manager should be in three hours. By then, he will surely notice something unusual here."

Yamanaka was supposed to report to Kandori twice a day, at one and five o'clock. If he delayed even for a minute, Kandori would call. So if the phone didn't connect, he would surely realize something was wrong.

"But..." A young man spoke with a worried expression. "*They* won't come all the way here, will they..."

"Nonsense. This place can withstand even a direct hit from a missile. Don't worry."

"Still..."

"And without the password, this lock can't be unlocked. This place is absolutely safe!"

Yamanaka asserted.

But in reality, he didn't believe his own words.

With their immense power, there was no guarantee they wouldn't enter.

If they did, and if this door were to open, he would be at the mercy of the monsters just like those outside.

(If only I locked the door to the Deva System's room faster, we could have kept them contained there...)

He had a bad feeling since he first saw it.

Yamanaka turned his eyes to the door, as if he heard a noise.

"!?"

Apparently, what he had feared was about to come true.

"T-The door...!?"

Before their eyes, the pipes that locked the door slowly and loudly retracted. If all the pipes are retracted, the door would open.

(No way! This is impossible?!)

Could it be that those hideous beings that were nothing like human beings, had unlocked the password?!

However, what was happening before their eyes wasn't a hallucination.

(That means...I'm going to die too...)

Yamanaka was dumbfounded.

Soon, all the pipes were stowed inside the walls.

"T-The door is opening!"

With a dull sound, the door began to slide.

Once this door opened, those outside would rush in all at once. There would be nowhere to run.

"Is this the end for us..."

Yamanaka's strength drained from his body.

But it wasn't the end.

Standing beyond the open door were men clad in black suits.

They were shining, soaked in blood, glowing a dark red in front of them.

Everyone trapped inside cheered upon seeing them.

"Oh, SS... So, we're saved?"

Yamanaka wiped the sweat from his forehead with relief.

What lied in front of him were unmistakably human beings.

The SS men standing in front of the room opened their way to the sides.

Then, Yamanaka was surprised to see a man enter the operation room from behind the SS men.

"P-President!?"

"What happened to the experiment, Yamanaka?"

Yamanaka was astonished to see the branch manager himself, accompanied by the SS, appear here.

"Is the Deva System safe?"

"Y-Yes..."

Yamanaka, in a daze, didn't understand what he was being asked.

"A-Anyway... Please, take me... Take me back to the surface"

Yamanaka clung to Kandori.

"This is..."

Shocked by the scene of the Deva System room displayed on the LCD screen, they were at a loss for words.

"The moment when an immeasurable amount of energy was detected during the experiment, an intense light emerged from within the machine, rendering the system uncontrollable" explained Dr. Nikolai to Kandori.

"It wasn't until some time later that those strange creatures began to appear" he continued.

The Deva System's room had become a nest for bizarrely shaped lifeforms.

Before their eyes, eerie creatures began to swarm them.

"They...they're monsters..."

Even the stoic Taketa was shocked by the sight.

(So this is why Yazawa and everyone else had been defeated...)

If they're not human, then professional logic doesn't apply.

Taketa thought that perhaps Yazawa's attempt to bury them, even at the risk of his own life, was his final stand as an elite.

“Mr. Kandori, are you familiar with the legend of King Solomon?”

Dr. Nikolai began speaking to Kandori as if giving an university lecture, all the while Kandori stared at the screen in disbelief.

King Solomon... this heretical king, who appeared in the Kingdom of Israel in 970 BC, was considered the most wise man in the history of the Kingdom of Israel.

“Do you remember why he was called the heretic king?”

Kandori remembers that well.

The reason King Solomon was called the heretic king...

It was because he had summoned the seventy-two demon generals of the demon army that had been defeated in a battle with God seven thousand years ago by using some secret arts.

What kind of secret art did King Solomon use to summon the demons is still not known in the present day.

However, using that secret art, he manipulated powerful demons such as the King of Hell Baal, the Grand Duke of Hell Halphas, and the Grand Duke of Hell Vassago as his own limbs, as if treating them like slaves, and brought glory to his kingdom by utilizing the power of demons.

After the completion of the Solomon Temple, which boasted transcendent beauty, built using treasures gathered from around the world through the power of demons, it is said that the king sealed the demons he had summoned in brass vessels.

“King Solomon summoned the seventy-two demons who hid in the shadows of the stars in heaven after being defeated by God. However, the legend ends indicating that the demons escaped from King Solomon's seal, with all but Belial fleeing to heaven...”

In the end, it's said Belial remained on earth pretending to serve King Solomon, wreaking havoc on humans.

“Doctor, you think you summoned the demons controlled by King Solomon?”
Kandori's eyebrows twitched.

“Perhaps so” The doctor nodded. “But I am a scientist. If the Deva System has indeed summoned something akin to King Solomon's secret arts, we must investigate its true nature, just as we investigated everything about the other Mikage-cho”

The other Mikage-cho...

This experiment was conducted based on the spatial data obtained at that time.

"If this Mikage-cho is another form of our world, then what about those creatures this time around?"

The doctor pointed to the Deva System on the screen.

The Deva System, still in motion, periodically opened and closed gates, occasionally sending hideous creatures into this world. Its appearance was reminiscent of the gates of hell.

"Those are creatures from a completely unrelated space to our world. What kind of cell structure do they have, what kind of physical composition do they

live in? And what exactly did they show us when they appeared here? Clearly, they are completely different from our world!"

Nikolai's tone showed his excitement.

"In other words, this system has made contact with a world that we cannot perceive. Now, humanity has a chance to unravel the mysteries of space through the Deva System!"

Dr. Nikolai emphasized that he had proven the existence of another timeline where humans still reside in and live.

"We must first determine what world those abominations over there come from..."

"Wonderful..." Kandori expressed his admiration.

However, it wasn't for the advancement of the doctor's research—but for the beings on the other side of the screen.

Yet, no one was aware of it.

...No one.

Whether the Deva System had replicated King Solomon's secret arts using the power of science was irrelevant to Kandori.

He was fascinated by the detestable creatures.

(I feel like I've seen them somewhere before...)

II

The team traversed through intricately curved corridors towards the control room.

"First, we must eliminate those creatures and reclaim the Deva System room. Everything depends on that..."

The Doctor nodded at Kandori's words.

Then, he looked at Taketa's face.

"Eliminate the monsters in that room and retake the device in front of you"

"Understood"

Taketa responded without showing any emotion.

"You may annihilate the monsters, but don't damage the Deva System"

"We don't have knowledge of how to handle that device..."

"You'll be fine. Director Yamanaka shall accompany you"

"N-No way! But there are monsters inside!"

Yamanaka, who had been sitting in relief, changed his expression to that of panic.

"They'll kill me!"

"And for that reason the SS will scort you" Kandori replied.

"I'm not fooling around! Then, what about Dr. Nikolai! Why not send him in? It was his experiments that brought this on in the first place!"

"Dr. Nikolai has other tasks to attend to. Besides, you are the one in charge of this laboratory."

"B-But..."

"Then, who is responsible for the accident?"

That's right. While Dr. Nikolai's research was being conducted in the underground laboratory, the organizational responsibility ultimately lay with Director Yamanaka.

"This is your job." Kandori stated coldly. "Quickly bring the situation under control."

(But... that's...)

Wasn't it you allowed the Doctor to perform the experiment? Yamanaka thought, but couldn't say it to his face.

"I'll tell you this much, a man who can't even clean up an accident of this magnitude is useless to me" Kandori said in a cold, monotonous tone. "Protect the Deva System. I'll overlook your mistakes for that"

Whether they were creatures summoned from another dimension or demons summoned by King Solomon, Kandori didn't care. The only thing that mattered to him was the Deva System.

"Hurry!"

Yamanaka had no choice but to comply with those words.

(Why... Why do I have to go through this...)

Yamanaka stood in front of the door to the Deva System room, clutching the security card in his right hand, which was trembling with fear.

Sweat streamed down his forehead.

(Damn you, Kandori!)

Yamanaka's face contorted with frustration and dread.

(I'm a director precisely for times like these!)

Now, Yamanaka realized for the first time that he had been a pawn. While he had thought he had cleverly maneuvered himself to get around Kandori unlike others who have been crushed by him, he had ended up in such a dire situation.

Yamanaka lamented his own misfortune.

It was all Nikolai's fault. Why does it have to be me?

Yamanaka's hand holding his ID card trembled.

"Director Yamanaka"

Taketa's voice came from behind him.

"Unlock the door quickly."

"Y-Yes, yes..."

"You have no choice"

However, Yamanaka couldn't do it. His body was paralyzed.

Taketa glanced over to the burly man standing next to him. Then, he silently nodded back, walked up to Yamanaka, and firmly grasped his trembling right hand.

"Ah!"

Yamanaka snapped back to reality.

The man had grabbed his right hand holding the security card and was trying to read it on the sensor of the gate.

"S-Stop it! Please stop!"

Yamanaka resisted frantically, but the man's left hand restrained his arm and chest, preventing him from moving. As Yamanaka tried to resist, the card in his right hand entered the sensor

A mechanical beep echoes through the air.

"Unlocked"

The door's security was released, and the sound of the motor retracting the locked pipe rang out.

Soon, the door began to open in front of Yamanaka.

"All personnel, prepare to enter."

Taketa instructed his subordinates, who were still aiming their guns at the slowly opening door.

"From here, we will exterminate the enemy while manually stopping the power supply unit to the left of the door."

There was no other way than to stop the Deva System's power supply.
Eventually, the door began to slowly open up.

"Hyeeek!!"

Yamanaka uttered a cry of despair.

It was as if the gates of hell were opening.

And in the end, the door opened.

Yamanaka was pushed back by Taketa and stepped into the system room.

The floor was stained with blood, staining his feet. Deformed monsters roamed the room with a look of arrogance, looking at Yamanaka.

One resembling a naked woman with wings stretched out on her back smirked, a fierce monster with a lion-like head glared towards them, and one with a bull-like head followed Yamanaka's movements with its eyes.

They all roamed in the bloodstained room, waging the strength of Yamanaka and his team. If they lowered their guards for even a moment, they would not hesitate to attack them.

(It's over...)

Yamanaka's legs buckled. The monsters in front of him were not five or ten in number, they exceeded twenty.

There were being outnumbered.

(I'll be eaten too...)

Yamanaka saw the corpse of a researcher rolling at his feet.

A body with a lab coat stained with blood lied on the ground... which then, it grabbed his leg.

"Eek!" Startled, he reflexively jumped up.

"Chief, this is horrible..."

"Y-You're... Asada-kun?"

The man in the blood-stained lab coat lying face down was Asada, who had served as Dr.Nikolai's assistant.

"You're horrible. Leaving us behind and saving yourself..."

"A-Are you okay?"

Asada raised his head, the back of his white lab coat was stained red, but he still had his hands and feet.

"You're the Chief... You can lock them..."

Saying so, Asada got up and grabbed Yamanaka's shoulder with his bloodied hand.

"No, I... I would never..."

Yamanaka was about to say that much, but he fell silent.

"You, Asada-kun..."

There was a gaping hole in Asada's abdomen. And from that hole, the bloodstained floor could be seen.

"We've been eaten by these guys...Because of that, I feel so cold"

"H-Help... me..."

As Yamanaka sought help from the SS behind him, he felt his body freezing.

"He... Help..."

In front of them, Yamanaka's body froze completely. Even the SS employees took a step back involuntarily.

Asada smirked and released his hand from Yamanaka's body.

"You guys...can warm me up...too..."

The man who had once been Asada, now a frozen body, began to walk towards the SS that were on standby.

"Burn him" Taketa ordered calmly.

Three men in front of Taketa used small flamethrowers slung over their shoulders. Flames danced in unison.

"Fuhaha, it's s-so warm..."

As if rejoicing in the flames, Asada's body began to burn.

And thus, the deadly struggle commenced. Everything lurking in the System's room deemed them enemies, and their gazes filled with killing intent turned towards them.

"Commence combat. I'll leave it to you all, exterminate them!"

Taketa shouted.

"They're nothing but beasts, weak against fire. Incinerate them!"

Three members of the flamethrower squad created a wall of flames, while Taketa and the other three began to shoot bullets at those distracted by the flames.

But...

(Yamanaka... You ended up being useless in the end...)

Kandori watched Yamanaka's final moments on the screen.

On the same screen, at present, the seven SS members led by Taketa were locked in a deadly battle with the grotesque beings.

Initially, it seemed like they could reclaim the Deva System Room by incinerating the monsters in an instant with flamethrowers. However, the monsters on the other side of the screen were moving around unaffected by the flames.

(Are they not afraid of fire...?)

Not only that, but some of the monsters didn't even seem to feel any damage from being shot.

The SS members were being overwhelmed.

One by one, they fell to the claws and fangs of the assailants.

(Taketa, do something...)

Kandori felt frustrated by the powerless SS.

(Whatever it takes, get the Deva System back!)

(Kill them all!)

*(Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill
them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!) (Kill them!)*

The desperate struggle of the SS was stirring something within Kandori.

On the other side of the screen, a winged woman's claws pierced through a man's eyeballs to his brain, her sharp claws protruding even from the back of his head.

Enjoying how his brain matter clung to her claws, she laughed.

The black-clad man who had been struggling to push back the hand that had pierced him stopped moving.

(Is he dead...?)

A twisted smile appeared on Kandori's lips.

(Humans are such fragile things...)

Kandori's consciousness awakened.

(That's why they should perish... Humans...)

The creature with the form of a naked woman withdrew the arm she used to pierce the man.

Like a broken doll, the man collapsed powerlessly on the ground.

With her long tongue, the woman licked her arm smeared with blood and brain matter. And then she laughed, she laughed cruelly.

(Maybe it's not so bad being killed by these beings...)

An impulse suppressed within Kandori surged forth.

His mind was exhilarated. He had never felt this sensation before.

(Maybe, I should just...)

Kandori saw something lurking behind the woman's cold smile...

Something he had seen somewhere before.

(Where have I seen it... I'm sure I've seen it before)

Yes, this is...

That laughter of the priest from that time!

III

"We are not the kind of new religious sect you think we are"

The priest had a thin, ghastly smile on his sallow skin. He was slender and tall, and wore a robe that was unusually dark and red for a clergyman, as if it were dyed in blood.

"Our teachings are older than any existing religion"

His calm speech hinted at something reminiscent of an old, distinguished lineage.

It was a secluded church in the outskirts of London.

Kandori had visited it upon hearing from Albert Bloch, a theology student, that there were churches believing in a devil completely different than the one taught in Christianity.

Takahisa Kandori was studying in England during that time.

He was in the graduate school Oxford University.

In Japan, no matter where he went, he was only seen as the son of a politician, the heir of the prestigious Kandori family. But here, everyone saw him as just Kandori Takahisa, an individual.

Here, he didn't have to feel his father's pressure on him.

Upon coming to England, he was finally freed from his father's absolute presence for the first time in his life.

But upon being liberated, he began to doubt.

Doubt the ideology his father had instilled in him.

Since childhood, along with a thorough education, he had been indoctrinated with the belief of being a gifted young man.

His personality was shaped by the pride and pressure of being part of the Kandori family, a bloodline meant for the chosen ones.

Kandori's doubts grew stronger and deeper as he indulged in his freedom.

*Was I truly meant to be one of the chosen?
If so, what is it that I, as a chosen one, should do?*

This was a fundamental question arising within him.

To resolve it, he started delving into various religious and philosophical texts. While in Japan, he hadn't been allowed to read these books, so the content was all new to him. Particularly, his interest lay in the descriptions of the "chosen ones." He sought his answers within them.

Through this exploration, he learned for the first time that the ideology of "the chosen people" was the source of all religions and philosophies.

In Judaism, only Jews were the chosen ones, and in Christianity, it was those who believed in Jesus. Apart from these, he delved into Islamic and Buddhist texts, striving to understand the essence of the chosen ones.

Therefore, he read a lot of literature regarding this subject at Oxford University's library. However, none of the books provided a satisfactory response to him. The chosen ones were just that—chosen.

"Is something so absurd really possible?"

*What makes a man be proud of himself as a chosen being?
Was seeking answers in books an attempt to find a rational reason for being one of the
chosen?*

However, the more he read, the more the belief instilled by his father that he was special began to waver.

It didn't take long for this question to evolve into a contemplation of what it means to be human.

His visit to that church, guided by Albert's information, was also in search of answers to these questions.

"You wanted to know the meaning of human existence, didn't you?"

The priest smirked.

"Very well, let me tell you."

Initially, when the priest began speaking, Kandori thought, "*Here we go again*"

It was a narrative about beings who were born in outer space, who arrived on Earth before the birth of humanity and ruled over it. They were what they called the "Great Old Ones"

His disappointment grew, as it sounded like the typical alien stories associated with new religions.

As expected, the priest mentioned that the Great Old Ones created humans and animals on earth.

(This is just a rehash from some Christian sect...)

It's a common tale to worship God as an extraterrestrial being.

Kandori had heard the tale of UFOs coming to save only the chosen ones on Judgment Day countless times before.

However, what followed unexpectedly caught Kandori's attention.

"The Great Old Ones created humans and animals to be their sustenance."

"Humans?!"

"Yes" The priest nodded. "They fed animals and plants to humans and then consumed humans as their food. Humans, often called the highest beings, were merely the food of the Great Old Ones"

"But..."

"No," the priest interjected. "When I say they 'eat,' it doesn't mean they consumed our physical bodies. They consumed our spirits. Within that they particularly favor fear and despair"

The priest spoke of humans living solely to create fear and despair.

The Great Old Ones raised humans as we raise crops and livestock.

Fear and despair...

While Christianity speaks of salvation through love and Buddhism through compassion, there was no salvation to be found within these teachings.

Religions that did not guarantee salvation were common in Asia, such as China and Japan, known as the so-called "land gods"

These deities, often symbolizing nature such as mountains and seas, were usually worshipped as beings greater than humans, bringing both threat and blessings.

Kandori had read about this in books. But...

(That humans are mere food...)

It was unheard of.

While there were rituals involving devil worship and Eastern gods where sacrifices were offered, they were conducted in exchange for something.

In any case, Kandori concluded that faith, in whatever form it takes, is performed with the promise of some benefit to humans in exchange for their belief.

Thus, a religion that denied the meaning of human existence from the outset was refreshing to him.

No, rather, for him, who was tired of the egotistical and arrogant aspects of Western religions, this concept seemed more correct.

"Then..."

"I shall answer that question as well."

The priest laughed.

"Where did the Great Old Ones disappear to...isn't that right?"

Kandori nodded. He felt like his mind was being read.

"Thousands of years ago, there was a great upheaval in the world. No, they didn't perish. They fled. To protect themselves, they fled to another world, what we call a different dimension..."

(Different dimension!)

Kandori snapped back to reality.

(Could it be, that the space connected by the Deva System is...?)

Did the Deva System brought the Great Old Ones the priest spoke of back into this world?

(It certainly feels like it...)

The uncanny wriggling creatures could be said to be the living images of the Great Old Ones depicted in the books shown the priest had showed him.

(But, hold on...)

Was that really the case?

That question was drowned out by a monstrous roar.

A sound that makes those who hear it tremble...

Completely unlike human speech, it had a sound akin to chanting.

A sound that seemed to praise the sacred.

It was only after being translated into sounds that human ears could recognize that it could finally be described as such.

(These words...)

A sound he had only heard once before began to grow louder and louder in the depths of his mind, as if it were trying to dominate his entire train of thought.

(Azathoth. Yog-Sothoth. Shub-Niggurath)

It caused him tremendous mental anguish.

The voice now seemed to be trying to take control of everything in his head.

(Azathoth. Yog-Sothoth. Shub-Niggurath)

"What's happening to me right now..."

He felt himself being engulfed in a whirlpool of unimaginable darkness. Within that vortex of darkness, screams of terror filled the air. He too, overwhelmed with great fear, was being swept towards the center of the vortex.

After a delirium that couldn't be conveyed in words, he found himself drifting away in a decaying universe, amidst the dying darkness and a world ravaged by the winds of death.

His body was being dragged along as if being drawn by someone.

After traversing countless universes, he found himself standing before countless pillars of a shining temple in the void.

And there, he saw the eerie and sublime presence.

Beyond the resounding, echoing madness of drumbeats and the dark melodies of flutes that seemed to desecrate the gods was...

CHAPTER VI

NYARLATHOTEP

"These personnel..."

As Mayo looked at the lists flowing one after another from the fax machine, her face turned pale.

Her hand holding the list trembled.

"I didn't think it was possible, but..."

Among the several lists she held, one was titled "Saeki Telecommunications New Organizational Personnel Chart."

Flowing in one after another were the new organizational charts for all companies within the Saeki Group. Each list compiled for each company was created through discussions within the Tokushin Association.

Although it was an announcement of new personnel changes across all departments of the Saeki Group, Mayo knew that such a large-scale operation had never been carried out at this time as far as she was aware.

She was able to obtain this list, scheduled to be distributed to group executives a week later, thanks to a young member of the management planning department who secretly acquired it after recently joining the Takazume association.

There was a stamp on the list that marked it as top secret.

She continued to read through every list that came her way.

"I can't believe it. Why is this happening..."

Every list that came through was the worst news possible for Mayo.

"It's like they're targeting us... Why?"

She picked up a newly arrived list.

"This too."

The list was labeled "Saeki Electronics"

"As I thought, Hoshikawa and Hatano are being demoted..."

Hoshikawa, the head of the general affairs department, and Hatano, the head of the accounting department, were both members of the Takazume network. Only those two were being demoted from their current positions and transferred to affiliate companies.

"This too... and this too..."

All the strength drained from her body.

"We lost..."

She thought she had been defeated by Executive Director Morikawa.

"So, it's retaliation..."

Saeki Real Estate and Saeki Bank both demoted only members of the Takazume association. And for some reason, Morikawa's henchmen were being placed in their posts.

"The operation was supposed to be perfect, so why..."

The fraudulent resources gathered by the Kandori's young supporters were supposed to be flawless. Even Chairman Saeki should have had no choice but to act after witnessing the material...

Even if Morikawa's faction wasn't ousted, at the very least, Kandori could have replaced President Kanda and become the president of SEBEC. If lucky, he could have even become an executive at the heart of the group, Saeki Corporation. She thought Kadori's faction would rise to even higher positions within the group than before. But they failed.

"I was too naive..." Mayo bit her lip.

(My mistake was underestimating Morikawa...)

Mayo was shocked at how powerful Morikawa was.

"I have to report to the Boss..."

If this continued, not only herself but Kandori would be overthrown.

Mayo felt darkness completely overtake her eyes.

But...

(There's still a week until the announcement)

Mayo reassured herself.

Perhaps there was still something they could do before then, she thought.

No matter what, I must protect Kandori.

(Even so...)

What kind of move did they make?

To think he could avoid his downfall even after being presented with evidence of such corruption...

Not only that...

"I never thought they'd completely uproot the Takazume Association..." Mayo muttered, startled.

(The Takazume Association!)

"Why would they involve the Takazume Association!?"

Was there someone besides the members of the Takazume Association and herself who knew about this!?

(That can't be...)

Mayo shook her head in response to her own question.

"The executive director couldn't have possibly known..."

All meetings were held in strict secrecy, and all communications were conducted at home.

"But..."

The fraudulent accounting materials were created by the members of the general affairs and accounting departments within the Takazume Association.

If the whistleblower was identified from the information contained in the documents, demotions should have been limited to the accounting and general affairs departments.

However, even members from the sales and planning departments, who had nothing to do with the prosecution, were being demoted.

These demotions could only be seen as retaliation after learning of the existence of the Takazume network.

That means...

(Could it be?!)

There was only one possibility.

There must be a traitor within the Takazume Association...

And that was the only explanation.

(If that's the case...)

A beeping sound echoed from the fax machine in front of Mayo. It was the signal that the fax machine had completed the last incoming transmission.

"The traitor is among the remaining lists!"

Mayo picked up the few remaining sheets she hadn't looked at yet.
And she searched.

The traitor must be someone who hasn't been demoted!

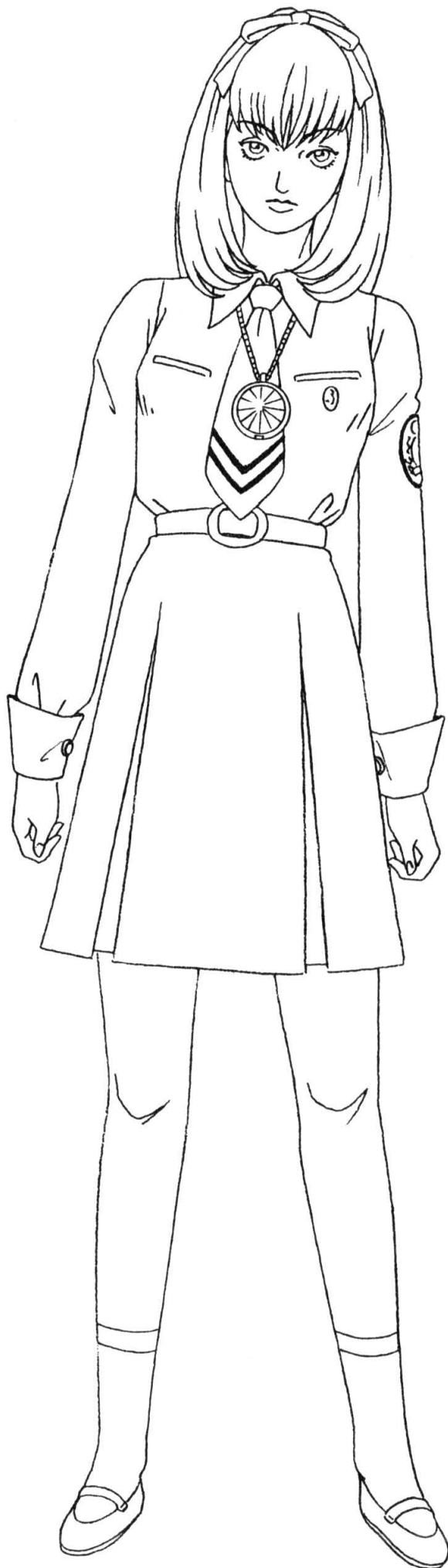
Eventually, she found them among the last sheet.

(N-No way...?)

Mayo's shoulders trembled violently.

(I can't believe it. This can't be happening...)

Mayo wanted it to be some kind of mistake.



II

The elevator was heading towards the ground floor, Kandori and Taketa were the only people inside.

Kandori had been wearing a smile of tension and excitement next to the silent Taketa since a while ago.

(With these hands of mine...)

He spread his arms in front of him, and looked at each of his fingers. They were trembling.

(Do you want me to do it...?)

That was the condition.

(I have to do it)

The answer is obvious, I have no other choice. He tried to convince himself.

But the trembling of his fingers wouldn't stop.

On the contrary, it kept getting worse.

When he tried to visualize that scene in his mind, his breathing became erratic, his throat parched, and he felt suffocated.

He involuntarily reached out his trembling right hand to loosen his tie, but his hand wouldn't move as he intended.

With great effort, he loosened his tie.

However, even after loosening his tie and unbuttoning his shirt, he couldn't escape the oppressive feeling that was tightening around his neck.

In fact, the pressure was only getting stronger.

"President, we'll be arriving shortly."

Taketa announced calmly as the elevator stopped.

"A-ah" Kandori's reply was muffled.

With a ding, the elevator stopped, and the doors opened.

Kandori stepped out of the elevator and walked slowly towards the hidden passage to the branch manager's office.

As Taketa pressed the button on the wall, a familiar room unfolded in front of him.

"Did you come?"

On the other side of the sliding wall, Kandori spotted a woman sitting on the sofa in a slumped position.

It was Mayo Miyashita.

"Boss"

She stood up.

Her face looked serious, as if troubled by something, but it still held a woman's gentleness.

However, when she saw the man walking behind Kandori, that gentleness vanished.

"!?"

Why is the SS's Taketa here...?

Mayo's face immediately showed signs of alertness.

But without paying her any mind, Taketa simply nodded to Mayo and quietly left the manager's office.

"Why on earth is SS here!"

She rushed to Kandori, who had returned to his desk.

"Aren't the SS supposed to be Executive Director Morikawa's bodyguards!?"

Everyone in the company knew that the Saeki Security Service was ostensibly a security company, but in reality it was actually a private police force under the control of Executive Director Morikawa.

"Don't worry about it."

Kandori spoke, sensing Mayo's anxiety.

"They came to investigate the abnormality in the alarm system in the underground laboratory"

"Then why...in the Planning and Coordination Office..."

"You were absent. So I contacted them directly..."

"But!"

"Don't worry"

There was something unusual in Kandori's tone.

There was a hint of restlessness about him.

"More importantly, do you have something for me?"

Mayo nodded at his words and handed a thick list to Kandori.

"Take a look at this"

He took one look at Miyashita's list.

"New personnel for the group?"

"The entire Takazume Association has been demoted"

"I see"

Kandori handed the list back to Mayo with an air of disinterest.

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"Boss!"

Tears spilled from Mayo's eyes.

"What happened between you and Executive Director Morikawa!"

Mayo thrust a sheet of paper from the list at Kandori.

It was SEBEC's organizational chart.

Mayo's name was nowhere to be found.

However, a new position was added to Kandori's name as a branch manager—"company director"

"As you said, we made a deal. That's all."

Kandori replied without any remorse.

"No way!"

"Indeed, I used the materials you prepared for a deal with Executive Director Morikawa."

"What are you saying... you've betrayed us..."

"Yes" Kandori replied without hesitation.

Mayo was shocked.

"Boss, what have you done..."

(What happened to you, Boss?)

Where did the ambitious Takahisa Kandori go?

Of all things, making a deal with Executive Director Morikawa? She couldn't believe that the current Kandori was the real Kandori.

"Is there some reason behind this?"

Mayo didn't want to believe that Kandori had betrayed her.

"You don't need to worry" Kandori looked into Mayo's eyes, "Everything is going according to plan"

"According to plan?"

"Indeed," Kandori nodded, sporting a suspicious smile. "You said you would rise me to the top of the Saeki Group, but I had no interest in the Saeki Group from the beginning."

Kandori smirked eerily.

"As long as the Deva System completed, nothing else matters..."

"N-No..."

Miyashita was aghast.

"However, thanks to you all, we're one step closer to that goal"

"You mean, you used us for that?"

"Yes, I took advantage of you" Kandori's cold voice echoed in Mayo's ears.

"T-That's a lie..."

"It's not a lie. The contributions of the Takazume network served to silence Executive Director Morikawa and his men. Thanks to that, the development of the Deva System was approved as the top priority within the Saeki Group..."

Kandori showed a look of satisfaction.

"Then, what about the research staff that was increased since last month...?"

"They were exchanged for the materials"

"Why... would you pursue such research?"

"The Deva System is not just ordinary research" A powerful voice boasted, "With this, I can ascend into the realm of the gods"

"The realm of the gods...?"

"Yes," Kandori's lips relaxed. "With the device in the laboratory twenty meters underground, anything is possible."

Kandori explained all about the research carried out by Doctor Nikolai, something Mayo had never heard of before.

"No more SEBEC, no more Saeki Group. Don't you get it? I can rule over everything in this world as their new god. I'll even be able to bring damnation upon foolish humans!" Kandori's eyes began to gleam intensely.

"I have nothing to fear anymore! No one can compare me to my dead father anymore! Never again! Ahahahaha! Well? Well? How is it? Splendid, isn't it!? Soon, I will truly be the chosen one..."

Kandori laughed maniacally.

"Hahaha, Miyashita-kun, isn't it wonderful!"

Even as drool kept dripping from his mouth, Kandori continued to laugh hysterically.

"T-That's right, Miyashita-kun..."

"B-Boss..."

"You must be delighted, aren't you?"

Kandori collapsed onto the sofa, still laughing.

"I wanted power. *Power...*"

"Boss..."

Kandori continued his cackling. However, Mayo felt that there was something hidden within his crazed laughter.

(Is he bluffing?)

Perhaps it was her intuition as a woman.

Is he struggling with something?

"I-I betrayed you! I betrayed you to become a god!"

(That might be it...)

The restlessness she had felt since earlier now made sense.

It was guilt for betraying himself.

Thinking that, she pitied Kandori.

"Takahisa..." Mayo's hand reached out to Kandori's.

"Mayo" Kandori grasped her hand.

And for the first time, he called her by name.

"Mayo, help me." Kandori looked at her with desperation.

Mayo nodded.

"If it'll make you triumph above the rest..."

"For that end, would you do anything, for me?"

And she responded, slowly.

"Yes"

"Mayo"

Kandori looked into Mayo's eyes.

"Will you die for me?"

It sounded like a test.

But she answered clearly.

"If it's for you..."

At those words, Kandori's eyes suddenly lit up with delight.

It was as if he had been eagerly awaiting this moment for a long time.

"I see..."

Kandori nodded satisfactorily, his eyes gleaming with a dark, ominous light.

"I've been waiting for you to say that, Miyashita-kun"

"Takahisa?"

Mayo saw Kandori's expression change.

It was a face as cold as an ice mask.

Then, Kandori slowly untangled Mayo's hand and said,

"In that case..."

Kandori's arms stretched out swiftly.

"Die for me"

In an instant, his hands were around her neck.

"!?"

Kandori's fingernails dug into her throat.

"I'm so delighted, that you're willing to die for me"

While saying so, Kandori tightened his grip on her neck with both hands.

"It has to be you, Miyashita-kun... for the contract to be fulfilled..."

Mayo didn't understand what was happening to her.

(W-Why...?)

She kept her eyes fixed on Kandori.

"For the contract...Just like this...I have to...strangle the sacrificial woman to death..."

(I'm...a sacrifice...?)

Mayo's face contorted in agony as Kandori kept speaking.

"Yes, a sacrifice. I didn't mention it before, but the Deva System opened a hole to another dimension and brought demons into our world. I was quite surprised. They're just like the demons I read about in books... With their power, you, and all humans are nothing more than insects"

With madness in his eyes, Kandori continued to strangle her.

"Can you still hear me, Miyashita-kun? I can't believe in the idea that humans are chosen as the pinnacle of creation. After all, aren't all humans ugly, filthy, full of lies and deceit, a lump of self-righteousness? Someone has to punish these humans. I intend to punish humanity using the Deva System! Huh? How does that connect to your death? Good question, are you listening?

The voice, it made a promised to me.

I don't know how it understood my heart, but it promised me to grant me power...power comparable to that of a god.

And those demon-like beings will obey my command too. Isn't it magnificent? With this power, I will command demons and pass judgment on humans through the Deva System."

Kandori didn't loosen his grip.

"So, Miyashita-kun. **Die for meeee!**"

In her fading consciousness, Mayo saw it.

Before her eyes, darkness, vast darkness, spread out.

Kandori and herself floated inside the void...And also, something moved within that emptiness.

A huge shadow stirred.

The writhing shadow grew larger and larger within the darkness.

(What is... that...?)

From that silhouette, a dark, blackened figure covered her entire field of vision.

She saw its true form.

At that moment, she let out a voiceless scream and breathed her last.

What remained behind was what had been Mayo Miyashita.

And thus, Mayo died.

"Nyarlathotep, you promised me, give me your power!"

Kandori's cry resounded in the darkness.

"A sacrifice to Azathoth. A contract!"

"So be it, the contract is made."

Another voice echoed from the void.

How much time had passed? Kandori felt a weight on his chest and came to his senses.

"T-This is..."

A woman's body lay against Kandori's chest as he leaned against the sofa.

"M-Miyashita-kun..."

That red suit unmistakably belonged to his secretary.

"What did I just..."

A dull pain throbbed in his head. It felt unpleasant, as if he had just woken up from a nightmare.

"Get up, Miyashita-kun"

Kandori tried to move Mayo's body aside and stand up.

But then, he finally noticed—His own hands were around Mayo's neck.

"Eek!"

His fingernails were digging into Mayo's throat.

And then he realized, the blood running down his fingers that dug into her throat was staining his arms red.

"Miyashita-kun!"

He saw it, Mayo's face. Her eyes rolled back, tongue lolling out from her throat, hair standing on end.

Her once-beautiful skin was now marred with grotesque wrinkles, and her face contorted with fear and agony...

She was no longer the woman he knew.

"Aaaaah!" Kandori screamed.

It was undoubtedly a shriek of fear.

At that moment, he remembered everything.

"I-I killed her... I did this..."

I killed this woman, whom I even felt affection for, with my own hands.

Kandori hurriedly tried to remove his fingers from the corpse's throat.

But his fingers were stiff and would not come off.

"H-Help me, s-someone, get them off..."

EPILOGUE

THE APPOINTED DAY

"How's it going, Dr. Nikolai?"

Kandori appeared before Dr. Nikolai, who was working together with many scientists in front of the giant gate of Deva System.

"We've just finished all the calculations. The reboot can start in about an hour."

"So, that means it'll be at two o'clock in the afternoon..."

Kandori glanced at the clock.

"Mr. Kandori, about the accident the other day..."

"Oh, yes, regarding that matter, SEBEC has taken responsibility for compensating the families of the deceased. You needn't worry, Doctor."

"But..."

The Deva System experiment accident a month ago resulted in the loss of fifteen researchers and nine employees of the Saeki Security Services. Moreover, the Deva System itself was damaged and only yesterday had it been fully repaired.

"What exactly were those things we saw?"

"Are you referring to those creatures?"

"They were like demons, to say the least..."

"We're counting on you to unravel the mystery in this experiment, Doctor"
Kandori replied.

Back then, the monsters that appeared in this system room were all buried by Taketa's hand, but there was no record of it. The cameras monitoring the system room had all malfunctioned.

And at that time, a part of the Deva System's control unit was also damaged.

When everything was over and they opened the system room, they found corpses of monsters lying around that were blown away by an explosion. They concluded that Taketa had used explosives.

However, only Kandori knew the truth.

Taketa had also obtained the same power as Kandori...

"President..."

"What is it, Taketa?"

Taketa appeared in front of Kandori with his subordinates in tow. They were dressed in black, which didn't suit the laboratory, but since the accident, they had been stationed here for security reasons. There was no doubt that behind this lay Taketa's will to obey Kandori.

They all had chosen Kandori as their new master.

Taketa whispered quietly to Kandori's ear, as if avoiding being overheard.

"The boy is wandering around here once again, sir."

"If it's Reiji, leave him be. He's no more than trash to us now."

"And about the demons..."

"Yes?"

"They've been appearing even on nights other than the full moon. At this rate, we won't be able to keep them hidden..."

Perhaps due to the aftermath of the Deva System accident, since then, those creatures had been appearing in Mikage-cho during times other than full moon nights.

"I see. But it doesn't matter anymore."

"Then you mean..."

"Yes. I didn't tell you earlier, but today will be Judgment Day"

Kandori nodded.

"Finally, we'll give humans their punishment."

"Indeed"

Kandori smiled darkly.

(And we will be no exception to that punishment, Taketa)

Kandori murmured secretly in his mind.

(Humans are born with sin. The longer we live, the heavier that sin becomes. The only way to erase that sin is to die... I will now eradicate all humans and erase all the sins inherent to the human race)

But his euphoria was shattered.

"Ah!"

He saw it, his own hands were dyed crimson.

(Again, more blood!)

"Is something wrong?"

Taketa looked concerned at Kandori's condition.

"N-No, it's nothing"

Taketa thought Kandori looked tired, judging by his pale face.

"Perhaps you should rest for a bit?"

"Ah, yes..."

He looked at his hands again, there was no blood or anything on them.

Kandori was in the bathroom, rubbing his hands with soap as hard as he could.

(Why, why do I see blood...)

What was I, who had acquired power equal to that of a god, scared of?

(Am I still worried about that...? Idiotic!)

Every day since he strangled Mayo, it's been like this. As if the blood from that time still lingered in his body, this hallucination has haunted him.

Even though he knew it was just a paranoid delusion, he couldn't let go. He gets restless unless he washes his hands many, many times a day.

But no matter how much he washed, he could not get rid of the blood

Like a madman, Kandori's hands were writhing as he rubbed them with soap.

There was a shadow looming over his trembling back—a grotesque being with two arms and legs, large wings sprouting from its back, and a long, serpentine tail waving in the air.

It sneered at Kandori with cold, sinister eyes.

AFTERWORD

Hello to all 500,000 Persona fans nationwide.

What did you think of the novel version of "Megami Ibunroku Persona"?

This novel focuses on the hospitalized Maki Sonomura, Takashi Kandori of SEBEC's Mikage Branch and the secret character, Reiji Kido, all in the form of a pre-story about what happened before the start of the game.

If you think about it, the other characters from the game are Mai, Aki, Nanjo-kun and old man Yamaoka, Mark, Maki's mother Setsuko Sonomura, Dr. Nikolai, Taketa, Chisato Kasai, Yosuke Naito, and Ayase (by name only).

Original characters taking from the game setting are Chairman Saeki, Kandori's father, and in a completely original version, the politician executives of the Saeki group, Dr. Nikolai's assistants, SS members, a mysterious priest, and Kandori's secretary and confidant, Mayo Miyashita. If it weren't for her, all the original characters would've all been old men (laugh).

So, there might be some people saying, "Wait a minute! What were my favorite characters doing?" I wanted to include Elly, Yukino-san, Ms. Saeko, Kaneda-san, and Himeno-san too (I lied about Kaneda (laughs)). For now, fans of these girls, please send Victor Books a letter requesting publication of "The Snow Queen Arc Pre-Story".

Depending on the response, it might happen? Actually, I'd like to write stories about Ms. Saeko and others as well. Also, I'd be happy to receive your feedback.

Writing this novel reminded me of my high school days. I remembered my struggles. I failed the high school entrance exam and spent a year repeating it. Even though it was a rural school where only about twenty-five people should fail, I failed and had a dark year.

I was so shocked that I got a bunch of white hair, and every day for about a month, I dreamed of passing the exam.

I was just like Maki, really. At that time, I seriously wished my dream was reality. On top of that, my family was trapped in debt and loan sharks. The following year, when I entered high school, there were hardly any repeaters, and everyone treated me as if I were a tumor, which was depressing.

Even though this all happened to me, I am enjoying life now. So for those who have faced setbacks this spring, please believe in tomorrow and do your best.

Also, if you have friends who have experienced setbacks, please don't be overly cautious and continue to treat them as usual. That's what I appreciated the most.

Now, on a personal note, I will be publishing an original novel, this time from the same Victor Books in late June.

The title is "Detective Sarasa's Case Files: Ryoma's Conspiracy"

In the 26th year of Meiji, the year of Japan's first detective novel boom, the ghost of Ryoma appears before Ito Hirobumi and other high-ranking officials of the Meiji government. For what purpose did he appear?

The mystery of Ryoma's assassination lurks in the shadows!

Can beautiful detective Sarasa unravel the ghost's true identity? You can find out in this mystery novel full of civilized and enlightened humor.

If you see it at a bookstore, please pick it up.

Lastly, I would like to thank Satomi-san and Okada-san from Atlus very much.

P-Session Jun Nanbara (Nifty Serve ID HQ101342)

TRANSLATOR NOTES

General Notes

- There are parts where the characters are implied to be talking in English, to exemplify the characters speaking in english, the dialogue uses [] instead of japanese 「 」 . This is a bit lost within translation, so the only alternative was to change the font slightly to reflect this particular change. I could have kept dialogue as [] but I personally didn't like it much.
- In the original Japanese, character thoughts are said like
(セベクほどの設備があれば……)
(このままで、いたい……)

Alongside narration, I used italics to showcase this difference between character thoughts. In the original it uses some form of < and >, but in the subsequent novels by Jun Nanbara it was dropped for simple (). There are times when mid-text the characters talk to themselves or refer to themselves and their thoughts, so that was italicized as well.

- There are sub episode(?) separations inside Chapters, separated as II, III and etc.

Prologue

- "OL らしい" (オーエル), is an abbreviation to "Office Lady"
- タクヒ = Takuhi = Toufei (A demon from SMT and from Megami Ibunroku as well). The game goes with Toufei more than Takuhi, so I'm using Toufei instead.
- Kandori is referred to as 支社長 (Branch Manager/President (of company)). Always calling him "Manager" sounded a bit strange (to me), President felt fitting but still not quite. Chief isn't quite fitting, so at least for Mayo, who has a somewhat closer relationship with Kandori, I simply went with 'Boss' when it comes to being addressed by her and the rest can occasionally use Manager/Branch Manager or "President"

Chapter 1

- The Nanjo group is referred to as "南条コンツェルン" using Konzern as opposed to Conglomerate or Group.

- 宮下真夜 = Miyashita Mayo. I almost went with Maya or Mayu (as 夜 /can/ be read as 'ya') but Mayo has been used as a real name.
- 神取賢介 = Kensuke Kandori. Kandori's father's name (and Reiji as well)
- 水割りを = Mizuwari = 'To cut with water'. Diluting alcoholic drinks such a whiskey with two parts cold water. Judging by the context of the scene, I went a bit on the nose on the "cutting part" as it makes some sense.
- 助役 = A position equivalent to a deputy municipal mayor. It was abolished in April 1st 2007 due to a revision of the 'Local Autonomy Act'. Sometimes I switch between 'assistant official' (which is still a valid translation) and 'deputy mayor' (even though it's not relevant in our current time)
- 手刀 = 'hand used like a sword in striking'. The expression says "手刀を作り" which lit. means "make a hand sword" but 手刀打ち means "knifehand strike" also known as a karate chop. Judging by the context, I went a bit with a slightly more fitting expression (as 'kandori formed a sword with his hand' may be a bit confusing)
- 智恵 = meaning wisdom, spelt as "Chie". Likely Reiji's mother name.
- オフクロ = お袋/お母 One's mother. This is the way Reiji refers to his mother.
- 選民意識 = believing to be 'the chosen one'

Chapter 2

- エッシャー = M.C. Escher/Maurits Cornelis Escher. An artist known for creating quite a lot of complex illustrations centered on optical illusions.
- 騙し絵 = trompe l'oeil, which is essentially optical illusions. Most specifically "the highly realistic optical illusion of three-dimensional space and objects on a two-dimensional surface."
- 徳心会 = Tokushinkai. Tokushin can mean "Kind heart", When I search for it though I get an irl company for Social Welfare. Weird. Same with 鷹爪会, there is no direct translation of it so I simply went with "Takazume"
- 商事 = Shoji. Gets used a lot, it means "commercial company". I wasn't sure how to translate it. Company? Corporation?

Chapter 3

- Mai and Aki speak in a childish first-person sort of way. Instead of using watashi or atashi as a way to refer to oneself, they use their names. "Aki thought..." / "Mai wanted to..." so I kept it even if it may sound strange
- Aki calls Kandori "Papa" = パパ while Mai refers to him as "おじさん" = Old man/Uncle (more so as a stranger)

Chapter 4

- It was a bit difficult to translate the phrase "検知器をイングラムに持ちかえ" because I didn't know what was an Ingram and google didn't help much. HOWEVER, I ended up discovering it's the name for a gun. In Japan, it's called Ingram M10 (Known as a MAC10 in America). So, as they were holding detectors, they changed to holding a gun.

Chapter 5

- 無神論者=Atheist. It does use that exact word.
- わがもの顔="looking as if they owned the place", in short, arrogance (to me).
- The "Albert Brock" part is real, it's in the text as "神学部にいるアルバート・ブロックから、この世には、キリスト教の教える悪魔とは、全く違った悪魔を信じている教会があると聞いて訪れたのである" which is pretty weird but simultaneously interesting as it's likely meant to be correlating to Robert Albert Bloch, the writer of Psycho (THAT Psycho). Guy actually knew Lovecraft for a time, which becomes relevant as the text goes on. Weird bit to find in a Persona 1 novel of all things but it's there.
- 選民思想 = Being part of the chosen ones
- 旧支配者 = Great Old Ones, from Lovecraft mythos.
- 土地神 = Tochishin, this is a bit hard to translate for me...in a literal sense, it's "earth god" / "land gods" but they are more like 'folk gods' in a sense. Gods that reside on earth and are believed in by the people(?)

Chapter 6

- For some reason, during this part, the name changes from 森川 (Morikawa) to 森下 (Morishita) as if they are different people. This "Morishita" shows up only

at the very end, despite "Morikawa" being the most prominent name throughout. I'm not sure if this is a typo error or not, it doesn't seem consistent with the story so I used the name Morikawa instead. It's not that it matters, but the continuity error in terms of named characters is a bit strange.

Personal

I tried to be as close to the original script as possible, including the formatting. A lot of choices are weird, and the original novel has a lot of repetition in Japanese (that I tried to solve even if a little bit in English) and I may have added/changed some words for better readability, but I hope I did well.

I translated all of this entirely on my own, so a lot of things might not be as accurate. I try to be sliiightly less strictly 'has to be exactly the same as original, with the exact same pauses and separations' and focused on making it feel narratively coherent. Still nonetheless, any mistakes, typos or corrections anyone would want to make, I'm free to listen any time.

Thank you if you read this far.

I hope everyone gets to enjoy this novel as much as possible.

If you saw this document, you probably are aware of my tumblr but in case you obtained this from elsewhere, my socials are:

- **Tumblr:** Soleilnmity
- **Dreamwidth:** Perfectmachine
- **Twitter:** @nyarutatsu (+ Curiouscat with the same name)